



Coming Together: Building Relationships and Navigating Conflict to Reduce Discipline Disparities

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Partners from Chicago Public Schools and local education organizing groups share their experiences with the PASSAGE initiative.

The PASSAGE (Positive and Safe Schools Advancing Greater Equity) initiative in Chicago brought together representatives from Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the parent organizing group COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues), and the youth education organizing group VOYCE (Voices of Youth in Chicago Education), facilitated by the

Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. (For more on the initiative, please see the preface in this issue.) Over a two-year period, these three groups collaborated around the shared goal of identifying and eliminating identity-based discipline disparities in their city's schools. In this Q and A, we asked partners from each stakeholder group to reflect on the

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opportunities, challenges, and lessons learned from their participation in this initiative.

Q Can you briefly share a bit about your organization? What are your major roles and responsibilities in your position at your organization?

A *Treyonda Towns:* I am a parent leader with COFI's POWER-PAC group (Parents Organized to Win Educate and Renew-Policy Action Council), and a member of City Wide Leadership Council, the decision-making body of POWER-PAC. I am co-chair of POWER-PAC's Elementary Justice Campaign Committee as well as a co-facilitator and peacemaker at Wells High School. COFI's mission is to strengthen the power and voice of families by organizing primarily low-income parents of color.

Karen Van Ausdal: CPS is the third-largest school district in the United States, with more than 600 schools serving more than 400,000 children. CPS is committed to preparing students for college, career, and life, and as part of that mission we know that we must prepare students not only with the academic skills for success but also the social and emotional competencies. My role as executive director of social and emotional learning is to lead a team that supports schools in creating multi-layered supports for students' social and emotional growth. This work includes training and coaching in school and classroom climate development, social and emotional skills instruction, and behavioral health interventions.

Carlil Pittman: VOYCE is a multi-racial alliance convened by Communities United that is made up of youth from all over the city of Chicago. We build the leadership and power of young people from across the city to create change around issues of education and racial justice. VOYCE was founded in 2007, and we have

engaged more than 1,500 youth. VOYCE's core belief is that youth organizing and youth leadership development not only bring long-term change but also greatly impact individual youths' lives, transforming them into lifelong learners and effective agents of change. In the summer of 2013, VOYCE joined the Chicago Teacher's Union Quest Center and Alternatives, Inc., to form the Safe Schools Consortium (SSC). The SSC is an initiative that is working with four Chicago high schools to advance their leadership skills around restorative justice to create safe and supportive school climates.

I initially became involved in VOYCE as a youth leader, and my current position is youth organizer. VOYCE prides itself on creating a leadership pipeline, and I am now responsible for developing the next generation of young leaders.

Q How did you and your organization get involved in work to reduce school discipline disparities? What perspective do you and your organization bring to this work?

A *Treyonda Towns:* I got involved as a parent who was experiencing adverse treatment and challenges trying to register my daughters for one of Chicago's top-rated high schools. This was the final straw for me after experiencing several disturbing situations within CPS, including unjust suspensions and profiling of my oldest daughter. As a parent new to the CPS system, we were totally unaware of the discipline disparity there. Unbeknownst to me, there were many other parents experiencing the same type of systemic violations toward their children, who were tired of these foul and unjust discipline practices.

Many of those parents had come together at COFI to create the Elementary Justice Campaign. Parents had shared stories and had successfully

sought solutions. I joined the group, and through that work and that conversation, we were brought to the table with CPS's former CEO Michael Scott. He grabbed hold of our vision of alternative discipline practices within his schools.

This work is so important given that these personal experiences are backed up by data revealing that students of color are more likely to be recipients of exclusionary discipline. This shows us that our stories tie in to a larger problem, but it also shows us that we have allies. Having good data really helps us make our points and guide our work, but it is often incomplete, or the data available isn't the information we need. We hope that in the future the data will be broken down to include special needs/disability and gender identity.

Exclusionary discipline has also influenced the levels of violence perpetrated and experienced by young African Americans and Latinos. When a young person has been dehumanized and pushed out from the one place they should feel safe and productive, it incubates seeds of hopelessness, making the student very susceptible to more violence.

Our organization has a unique perspective on the work of discipline disparities because it comes from the parents. We have created parent-led Peace Centers as a solution to exclusionary discipline practices, and we have found allies within CPS to support this strategy. These safe spaces within the very environments that were once havens for negative and insensitive practices are now available for youth to practice conflict resolution, life, and relationship-building skills. The Peace Centers are also spaces available for the practice of restorative justice philosophies to be carried out. Because the Peace Centers are run by known parents from the community,

it allows a level of trust among youth and adults to develop more quickly than if they were run by an outside "professional" unfamiliar with the true personal dynamics of those communities. The parent peacemaker is more intimately familiar with the struggles and needs of the student than an outsider would be.

Karen Van Ausdal: CPS began the Suspensions and Expulsions Reduction Project (SERP) in February 2014 after a careful analysis of our discipline data revealed an overuse of out-of-school suspensions for low-level misbehaviors and a disproportionate use of suspensions for our African American students. This SERP built upon several years of work to move toward a restorative model of discipline and formalized these efforts into five workstreams: a revision of our Student Code of Conduct, community engagement around discipline reform, data transparency, professional development, and resource development. In my role as executive director of social and emotional learning, I see discipline as a means of teaching social and emotional competencies, both through the creation of systems and structures to foster a welcoming school climate as well as more explicit instruction in social and emotional skills through curricula and strategies such as talking or peace circles. We know that students cannot be successful if they are not present in our classrooms and that our classroom teaching cannot be successful if we don't build our students' social and emotional skills in tandem with their academic ones.

Carlil Pittman: When VOYCE was founded eight years ago, we chose to focus on creating safe and supportive school climates because that was the issue we felt had the highest need and importance for young people in Chicago. We found that many students in Chicago were being pushed out because of an overuse of exclusionary

discipline for minor discipline issues. Our findings would later be supported when the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights released data that pointed to huge racial disparities in Chicago and Illinois.¹

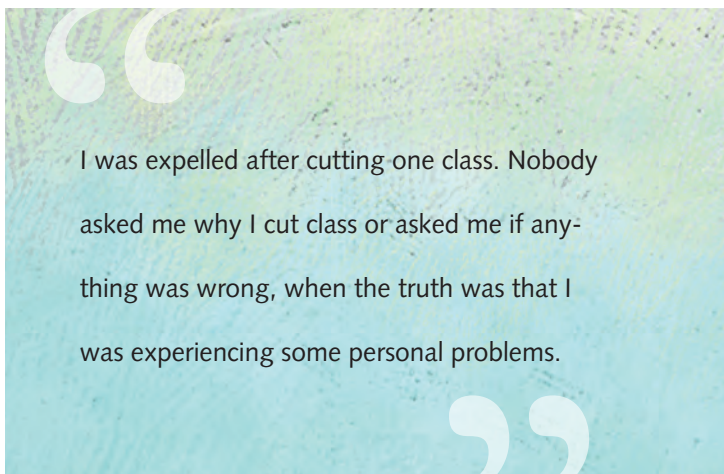
The issue was something I experienced firsthand. When I was a high school sophomore, I was expelled after cutting one class. Nobody asked me why I cut class or asked me if anything was wrong, when the truth was that I was experiencing some personal problems that led to me cutting class. My mother and I then had to search for a school that would take me in during the middle of the school year. By the time I found a new school, I had missed more than a semester of school. I beat the odds and graduated, but I had to attend evening, summer, and Saturday school for the rest of my high school career.

Q Many times, school districts and community organizers are, or are perceived to be, in conflict around issues of education reform and systems change. Can you give an example of when this has happened in your work? Why did the conflict exist? How did this look and feel from your and your organization's perspective?

A *Treyonda Towns:* Even though we have worked well in many ways with CPS administration, sometimes our work does engender conflict. At the beginning of our campaign, we were focusing on changing CPS's Student Code of Conduct (then called the Uniform Discipline Code), especially its written philosophy of "zero tolerance."

The administration paid lip service to many of our concerns at first. They changed the name of the manual because some parents found it confusing, thinking it was related to school

¹ For more details on CPS's data, see the report generated at the Civil Rights Data Collection website: <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/Page?t=d&ceid=32906&csyk=6&cpid=736#>.



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uniforms. They struck the "zero tolerance" language from the Code's philosophy statement and replaced it with a philosophy of restorative justice. But there were not significant changes within schools on discipline practices. The administration did not fully understand that the number of suspensions and expulsions was the problem and that it was connected to the fact that drop-out/push-out rates were at an all-time high.

Another area of conflict with CPS administration was around the lack of communication between various agencies that influence schools in Chicago. As a solution to this, we began to call together town hall community meetings, which included aldermen, the state's Department of Children and Family Services, the city's Department of Families and Support Services, CPS and its Student Special Services, the Chicago Police Department, community agencies, and others. To our amazement, we discovered that none of these departments talked with each other or shared information. This finding was disappointing but exciting because now we had an opportunity for cross-pollination and collaboration within the system responsible for the education of our children.

Karen Van Ausdal: In early efforts for changes to our discipline policy within

the district, community organizers initially approached the district from an adversarial perspective. We have moved from a notion that community organizers must fight against us for change to a shared belief that we must partner together to see that change. I think that SERP has allowed us to come together in a manner that embraces a shared philosophical approach to discipline policy but also acknowledges a shared awareness of where continued change and growth is needed in our policy and practice. As we build this trust and partnership, we can bring our varied perspectives to bear for the benefit of our students. Now, rather than using examples of ineffective school discipline practices as a means of rallying against the district, we can come together to discuss, analyze, and, most importantly, put action plans into place to increase the supports for restorative discipline practices.

Carlil Pittman: In 2012, VOYCE also launched a campaign to have CPS revise their Student Code of Conduct (SCC). While CPS ultimately revised the SCC that year, they did not match the comprehensive recommendations VOYCE and youth leaders had proposed, despite our recommendations being backed by data and best practices from other districts. We then kept organizing with a focus on the issue. Two years later, CPS would once again revise the SCC, and with the most recent revisions CPS has come much further.

Q In the PASSAGE initiative, CPS is in an explicit partnership with COFI and VOYCE to reduce exclusionary discipline practices and race-based discipline disparities and create more restorative cultures in schools. What are some of the benefits of this partnership? What have been some of the major challenges?

A *Treyonda Towns:* One of the really important benefits from

partnering with CPS is that we have been able to bring together community groups, CPS, and parents and then to bring in the data, the recommendations, and so many examples of the horrible incidences families had been suffering throughout the city for years. To be here today after working collaboratively and on a vision born over ten years ago by parents from across the city is absolutely wonderful.

Many partnering organizations had concerns and recommendations on school discipline, but we knew there were not easy direct answers for the “hows” and “whys” about what was happening. The constant communication and phone calls were not getting results; however, the group being respectful and hearing each other out has been very fruitful.

We did not really experience tension with CPS as a part of the PASSAGE work – though at times it does feel as if CPS likes to adopt our recommendations without giving us the credit for supplying the blueprint. Still, we are happy they are headed in the right direction.

Karen Van Ausdal: I think one of the biggest benefits of the PASSAGE project has been simply allowing us the time to get to know one another as people and build relationships with one another within a structured environment. PASSAGE has also allowed us to recognize some shared goals and to analyze discipline data both district-wide and specific to the schools with whom COFI and VOYCE are working more closely. I think that because we have allowed this partnership to evolve over time it helped prevent conflict even if there is a continued tension between the ideal vision of our community partners and the pace of change within a large school district. However, I think we all recognize that tension and celebrate growth where it has taken place while

continuing to push together for continued progress.

Carlil Pittman: The most important benefits in having VOYCE work with CPS has been the exchanges of information, data, ideas, and lessons learned. Through PASSAGE, CPS has also worked with VOYCE to share data that was previously unavailable to the public. This has allowed VOYCE to better measure racial disparities in all of the schools we work in and further identify best practices as we push for even greater public reporting data.

While VOYCE and CPS have begun to identify and work on new initiatives to reduce racial disparities, challenges do exist. One of these challenges has been the turnover in leadership in CPS; there have been six CEOs since Arne Duncan left in 2008. However, by partnering with the Office of Social and Emotional Learning, we are better able to form a long-term sustainable relationship with CPS.

Another challenge is that many solutions that have been created in partnership with CPS are focused on creating interventions or practices for schools to adopt to reduce racial disparities. For VOYCE, however, in order to best address the issue of disparities, resource equity also needs to be addressed by CPS as a whole. Resource equity is important to us, as many of our CPS schools, especially those in poor communities of color, have very limited resources.

Q How has a racial equity lens influenced the partnership?

A *Treyonda Towns:* Racial equality is primary for us, as the parents we work with are mostly parents of color and Latino, and the youth most adversely affected by unhealthy discipline practices are children of color and Latino.

Carlil Pittman: The focus on racial disparities has allowed VOYCE to

build an additional partnership to expand a racial justice equity lens. The use of a racial equity lens has allowed both VOYCE and CPS to better form long-term and short-term goals. For example, CPS has shared more detailed data that includes measurements for racial disparities to better understand what schools have high rates of disparities. Long-term goals include partnering to create interventions to reduce the racial disparities that are informed by the data that is collected and analyzed.

Karen Van Ausdal: A racial equity lens has provided the backdrop for this partnership. As a group we have analyzed data around the disproportionate impact of exclusionary discipline both nationally and within CPS. We have begun to plan ways to provide targeted supports to schools to support this racial equity work in partnership with one another.

Q Moving forward, what do you see as one or two key things for school districts and community organizations to pay attention to when engaging in an inside/outside partnership with a racial equity focus?

A *Treyonda Towns:* School districts and organizations need to remember to include the voices of the parents. We have deep insight into what is working and what is not, and we understand our children better than anyone. We also need to understand that racial equity, which is at the root of this issue, takes all of us working together to resolve. All parties and stakeholders must be willing to admit our role in the problem and be willing to take action to resolve it together as one voice breaking the silence surrounding the issue of race.

Karen Van Ausdal: As districts and community organizations move forward with partnerships around racial equity, I think it is key that they begin with building personal relation-

ships across boundaries and then, from that solid base, develop some shared goals for a given partnership. From a place of trust, it is then possible to move forward on the substantive work of shifting policy and practice. Further, it is critical that multiple layers of both organizations are aware of and in support of the partnership so that any action plans that are developed have the support to be put into action by those partners. I think that the ability for districts and partners to practice the type of courageous conversations that they would hope to see within school buildings creates an important model for change.

Carlil Pittman: The inclusion of student voice is key. The partnerships that VOYCE has formed with CPS through PASSAGE and outside of PASSAGE have been informed by lessons learned and solutions crafted with young people's leadership and input.

The other key thing is creating a model or template for exchanging data and ideas. The district has rich data that can point to what is working and not working in reducing racial disparities in schools. Through this data exchange, districts and community-based groups can better engage in strategy and planning sessions to better create interventions with a strong racial equity focus.

Lastly, by creating a partnership with a racial equity focus one cannot divorce issues from one another. For example, for VOYCE, the disparities in resources are large. Resource equity is a racial equity issue.

For more on VOYCE, see <http://voyceproject.org/>. For more on COFI, see <http://www.cofionline.org/>. For more on Chicago Public Schools, see <http://cps.edu>.

STATE-LEVEL VICTORIES IN ILLINOIS

Over the past year, as a result of the ongoing efforts of youth and community advocates, Senate Bill 2793 was passed in the summer of 2014 and Senate Bill 100 was passed in May 2015.

SB 2793 will: 1) improve public understanding of school discipline issues by requiring the public recording of data across all publicly funded schools in Illinois on the use of out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, removals to alternative settings, and student retention; and 2) require districts in the top 20 percent of use of exclusionary discipline and/or racial disparities to submit and report on improvement plans.

This is the first statewide policy change in the country that requires data transparency across all publicly funded schools, including traditional neighborhood schools, contract, and charter schools.

In August 2015, SB 100 was signed by Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner and will go into effect in September 2016. SB 100 will: 1) eliminate "zero tolerance" policies; 2) put tighter restrictions on the use of harsh disciplinary consequences; 3) ensure out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary referrals to alternative schools are only used for legitimate educational purposes; and 4) eliminate disciplinary fines and fees in any publicly funded school.

SB 100 is the strongest and most comprehensive effort ever made by a state to address the causes and consequences of the "school-to-prison pipeline." While schools in Illinois will continue to have broad discretion to maintain school safety, they will no longer be able to automatically require suspension or expulsion in response to particular student behaviors.