



Restoring Our Schools:

**A Comprehensive Proposal For Violence Prevention,
Safety Practices, and Community Healing in the
Rochester City School District**



**M.K. GANDHI INSTITUTE
FOR NONVIOLENCE**



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Executive Summary

- In October, 2021, four staffing unions wrote a letter to Rochester City School District (RCSD) leadership asking for, among other things, **additional police presence in schools**. Community members have expressed concern about the potential danger to students (Letter dated 11/3/2021 to Superintendent and Board of Education President from Parent Leadership Advisory Council and other district parent groups).
- Not only have school resource officers been found to be ineffective at preventing gun violence, a high level of police presence in schools has been documented to **negatively impact students**, leading to increased absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions, police referrals, and arrests of students. These effects are over two times larger for Black students than White students (Sorenson et al., October, 2021). The increased reliance on law enforcement is a symptom of a punitive, “zero tolerance” approach that supports the continuation of the “school-to-prison pipeline,” which pushes students out of school and towards the criminal justice system (Heitzeg, 2009).
- The crisis of violence in our school district represents an opportunity for a **renewed investment in best practices** for building a strong, safe, inclusive school community. As community organizations that support student-centered, nonviolent responses in schools, we propose an alternative approach, one which effectively and comprehensively restores our schools, prevents violence, creates safe practices, and heals our communities.
- Rochester has several **community based organizations at the ready** to support RCSD with the implementation efforts that our community has already invested in.

We propose a substantial, long-term investment in Restorative Practices - implemented with fidelity - in alignment with current research, best practices, and state, national, and international mandates. This approach not only provides for safer schools, but also improves school climate, supports students’ social-emotional well-being, and creates a healthy school climate and culture inclusive of staff, families, and students.

The History of Restorative Practices at RCSD

Since 2014, members of the Rochester community have come together to support the adoption of a Restorative Practices model at RCSD. These meetings brought together experts in multiple fields of child development, education, and policy research, to support developing, supporting, and sustaining RCSD's restorative practices initiative (The Children's Agenda, 2019).

One such community-based team was the Community Task Force on School Climate. This task force advanced several goals for the district's implementation of Restorative Practices, leading to the following outcomes:

- The formation of the district's RocRestorative team in 2015
- The hiring of Ruth Turner to lead the RocRestorative team, in partnership with local community-based organizations, as well as national experts
- The creation of a cohort model to support the development of "restorative schools," with implementation teams in each building
- East High School's partnership with the University of Rochester to implement a restorative model (Rochester Beacon, 2019)
- The revised Code of Conduct, based on a restorative model of prevention and responses to harm and misconduct
- The creation of the School Climate Advisory Committee
- The district's partnership with Dr. Joy DeGruy and the work of the Victorious Minds Academy

The success of the RocRestorative team can be seen in its longevity, consistency, and fidelity to the Restorative Practices implementation model. RocRestorative team members continue to support schools with training, implementation support, community building, responding to harm and misconduct, and crisis intervention.

An Evidence-Based Approach

In contrast to the use of increased police presence, which is not supported by educational theory or research, **Restorative Practices in schools is an evidence-based approach, currently supported by numerous educational organizations**, including the National Education Association, WestEd, New York State Education Department, and many more.

When implemented with fidelity, research suggests that Restorative Practices in schools has **positive effects on student experiences and outcomes** (Augustine et al., 2018; Klevan, 2021; WestEd, 2019). Positive outcomes have been documented in the areas of:

- Reduced use of exclusionary discipline practices
- Increased attendance
- Increased graduation rates
- Improved school culture and climate

Fidelity of implementation is the most critical factor to success when it comes to Restorative Practices in schools (Ashley & Burke, 2009; Brown, 2017; WestEd, 2019). The following key components are essential for implementing a restorative approach with fidelity:

- Anticipate a 3-5 year *change process*, led by district- and building-level change teams
- Invest in building *trust and buy-in* among administrators, staff, and community members
- Integrate Restorative Practices into the district's *overall philosophy*
- Incorporate *time in the school day* when Restorative Practices strategies can occur
- Develop a plan for ongoing *training, coaching, and debriefing*

In order to be effective, Restorative Practices must be culturally responsive and accessible to the diverse needs of students and families. The NYS Education Department's Culturally Responsive-Supportive (CR-S) Framework (2018) explicitly lists **Restorative Practices as a strategy for increasing cultural responsiveness**. Restorative strategies such as peacemaking circles (also known as community-building circles) provide for an inclusive, equitable space in which all participants can discuss values and resolve conflicts. **All interventions must be made available to students and families in their first language, and accessible to all.**

Finally, in order to change educational systems and school culture, implementation efforts must also **address systemic issues such as structural racism and implicit bias**, as well as code of conduct and other district policies that maintain racialized hierarchies (Davis, 2019).

Steps to Success: What Will It Take?

“RCSD should become a restorative district, investing in social-emotional and mental health supports, training for all students and adults, alternative disciplinary policies, etc.” (The Children’s Agenda, 2021).

We propose that RCSD formally re-commit to implementing Restorative Practices with fidelity, incorporating the following critical **steps to success**:

- **Strategic Planning:** In alignment with the district’s overall Strategic Plan, as well as the 2018 report from Jaime Aquino, we propose that district administrators work with the RocRestorative team to create a detailed 3-5 year plan, outlining a timeline for achieving key results across the district.
- **Leadership:** With the understanding that implementing restorative practices necessitates a framework shift away from punitive justice models, we propose that all leadership staff within RCSD experience, utilize, and model Restorative Practices as part of their culture, community building, and responses to harm.
- **Awareness Campaign:** We propose that the district communications’ office work on an ongoing basis to publish messages, across multiple modes of communication, to foster understanding and awareness of the Restorative Practices philosophy, evidence-base, core concepts, and district implementation plan.
- **District-Level Team:** In order to support the continuation and expansion of the RCSD’s district-level change team, we propose the district invest in growing the RocRestorative team, both in the number of team members, and in continuing professional development to stay up-to-date on current evidence-based best practices.
- **Building-Level Teams:** Each of RCSD’s 50 schools has its own set of capacities, challenges, and needs for support to fully implement Restorative Practices with fidelity. We propose that each building receive funding to hire a full-time Restorative Practices Coordinator, who will support continuing training, coaching, and problem-solving with staff, families, and students. Student leadership and voice in determining the direction of

school implementation efforts should be an essential component of building-level implementation teams.

- **Capacity Building:** We propose that RCSD continue to invest in ongoing training, coaching, and technical assistance to support fidelity of implementation across the district.
- **On-the-Ground Interventions:** We propose that RCSD utilize the full range of available intervention strategies that fall within the Restorative Practices framework, as well as those that are aligned with this approach, including: Mental Health First Aid, Peer Mediation, HelpZones, and others.
- **Community Engagement:** We propose that RCSD engage in ongoing partnerships with community-based organizations who can support the district with fidelity of implementation, as well as address ongoing barriers and challenges to implementation.

It Takes a Village: The Importance of Community Partnerships

“And how are the children?” - Traditional greeting among Masai warriors

This proposal represents a collaborative effort among three community organizations who are invested and committed to ensuring the success of RCSD, its leaders, staff, students, and families. We stand united, at the ready to continue supporting the district in the future.

Partners in Restorative Initiatives (PiRI): Beginning in the 2015-16 school year, PiRI partnered with Ruth Turner and the RocRestorative team to train the first cohort of administrators and staff in Tier 1 Restorative Practices, including strategies of Peacemaking Circles (currently known as Community Building Circles), Affective Language, and “I Statements.” PiRI also provided Tier 2 training to select staff, including school counselors and social workers, including strategies of Restorative Conversations and Harm Circles. Finally, PiRI provided Tier 3 training on Community Conferencing (also known as Restorative, or Victim-Offender Conferencing) to a small team of staff responsible for responding to cases of serious harm or those with criminal justice involvement. During 2016 through 2019, PiRI continued supporting the RocRestorative team with training for new staff, advanced in-service trainings for continuing staff, leadership training for district- and building-level administrators, as well as facilitation of Tier 2 and Tier 3 strategies in “high conflict” cases. PiRI has partnered with over 25 school districts throughout New York State, and hosts a semi-annual Western New York Restorative Practices Conference, collaborating with restorative practitioners across our region.

MK Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence: During the 2015-2016 school year, The Gandhi Institute partnered with staff from NorthWest College Prep in piloting the first Help Zone in the Rochester City School District (RCSD) which created a space where students came to get support in managing conflict and building social emotional skills under a restorative practices framework. During the 2017-2018 school year we helped to spread the pilot and staff Help Zones in Enrico Fermi School No. 17, Dr. Charles T. Lundsford STEM Academy School No. 19, and James Monroe High School. The Help Zone structure has now been expanded to more than half of RCSD schools. We are currently partners in staffing Help Zone spaces at Enrico Fermi School No. 17 and Dr. Charles T. Lundsford School No. 19. This past year, we worked with the entire staff at Charles T Lundsford, offering two tracks of experiential support and learning on culturally-responsive restorative practices. At the Enrico Fermi School, Gandhi staff and director worked on a weekly semester-long racial justice series for 40 teachers, January through June.

Since 2015 we've had 35,243 restorative student conversations. [Link to MKGI School Climate Transformation page](#)

[The Center for Dispute Settlement \("The Center"\)](#): The Center has partnered with RCSD to provide restorative interventions since 2017, offering Peer Mediation coordination and training at School 12, School 45, Edison Tech, and Vanguard High School. The Center also supports RCSD with Attendance Mediation, Special Education Mediation, and Early Intervention Mediation. As a Community Dispute Resolution Center (CDRC) through New York State's Office of Alternative Dispute Resolution, the Center provided Restorative Practices training to two cohorts of educators across Western New York, as part of a contract to support Restorative Practices through New York State Education. Staff and contractors at the Center currently provide training and implementation support services to Hillside Family of Agencies, as well as other school districts and higher education institutions across the eight county region we serve.

In addition to PiRI, Gandhi Institute, and the Center for Dispute Settlement, the following organizations participate in a monthly meeting of Rochester Restorative Administrators Group (RRAG), all of which are available as resources for Restorative Practices implementation:

- [Ibero American Action League](#)
- [Center for Youth](#)
- [Pathways to Peace](#)

Conclusion

“The word Sankofa comes from the Akan people of Ghana. It is an Akan term that literally means, “to go back and get it.” One of the Adinkra symbols for Sankofa depicts a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backward...There are several overlapping interpretations: Taking from the past what is good and bringing it into the present in order to make positive progress through the benevolent use of knowledge. Going back and reclaiming our past so we can move forward; so we understand why and how we came to be who we are today.” (University of Rochester, 2021)

The current crisis of violence within RCSD and the Rochester community represents an opportunity to look back and learn from the lessons of the past, as we continue to work together to build a brighter future for our students, families, and communities.

These challenging times call for bold, courageous leadership. We call on our partners at RCSD to renew our community’s shared commitment to Restorative Practices, and to building a strong, safe, inclusive school community. As community organizations that are invested in building a safer, more peaceful community within the City of Rochester, we stand united, at the ready, in the spirit of solidarity, collaboration, and mutual respect.

We are hopeful that an investment in Restorative Practices, following the evidence-based best practices presented in this proposal, will result in a transformation within the school district and the greater community, one which, in the words of Fania Davis (the sister of scholar and activist Angela Davis), “signifies the dawning of a new justice...that transcends the punitive and narrow assumptions of prevailing justice and offers a broader view of justice inspired by indigenous values. That is, a new but old justice that is healing, relational, community-based, inclusivist, participatory, needs- and accountability-based, and forward-looking.” (Davis, 2019)

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