

Growing Restorative Justice & Healing in our Schools

Lessons for School Practice from On Our Terms

Across New York City, many school communities are already actively engaged with restorative justice, experiencing both triumphs and challenges. In our focus group discussions with students, parents, and educators about their experiences in such schools, we heard example after example about the ways that schools are fostering restorative practices and healing-centered practices—and many ideas and hopes for how to improve upon and keep strengthening the work. Here, we gather recommendations that emerged from our focus groups and analysis about key school practices that can support restorative school cultures. Broken down by each of our ten themes, these recommendations describe specific strategies for growing in each of these areas, and include first-hand perspectives from community members navigating these approaches in schools. These recommendations should be considered alongside our policy demands, which are essential for the kind of transformational change we want to see.

As a whole, this list of recommendations can feel overwhelming. But remember, you don't need to tackle everything all at once, and we want to emphasize that this is a tool, rather than a to-do list or a step-by-step instruction manual. For many, it will make most sense to focus on one theme's recommendations that speak to a key area for growth in your school community. Or, you might decide to focus on one recommendation that connects to many different themes (e.g., the important role of advisory comes up multiple times). In every case, we encourage you to adapt and fine-tune these strategies to fit the specific needs, strengths, and character of your school. We understand that different relationships to community often will mean that action looks different. If you are reading these recommendations as a young person or parent, we hope they can be a tool to advocate within your school community for change. If you're an educator or administrator, we encourage these to be read with a critical eye towards the way decision making power is used within your school community.

Wherever you are in your journey of building restorative and healing practices, we hope these recommendations can be a source of support, confidence, and optimism in moving forward with specific, practical next steps in your school, and across New York City.

1. CENTER COMMUNITY & HEALING: The centering of community building is a crucial foundation to developing restorative practices. Restorative justice is relational work. Students, educators, and parents emphasized the central role of strong relationships in fostering supportive school cultures and restorative justice. Participants described restorative justice as a holistic approach to community care and healing that builds upon a foundation of relationships, shared values, and mutual support—a foundation that holds, even in moments of conflict, harm, or community struggle. Here are specific ideas about how we can center community and healing within restorative justice and culture in schools.

- ▶ Integrate restorative circles and other opportunities for relationship building, sharing personal experiences, and reflection throughout school life, including in classrooms, advisory, staff meetings, and community-wide events.
- ▶ Create community-wide gatherings for reflection and celebration with students, their families, and staff, such as town halls, rallies, and family nights, with an emphasis on strengthening intergenerational bonds, storytelling, and sharing hopes and ideas for the future of the school.
- ▶ Ensure administrators support staff through regular meetings that focus on the changing needs of teaching and support staff. If an administration is able to hold the needs of their staff, it increases capacity for staff to hold the needs of their students.

Nori R., (she/her), school staff: “Every student was expected to lead [a community building circle] at least once before they graduated and so that was scary for some students, but they eventually did it with the support of even their peers. And so... how do you put them in that leadership role with support but also provide them with feedback, right?... I think of that space as a place where we not only built relationships with students but also students with one another. We empowered them [the students]. They were able to use their leadership skills [to lead community building circles]. And it was a space of joy, but also a place where, when there was community wide harm... we could address it in what I like to think of as a safe environment. Students were like, ‘Oh man, our school’s really struggling with this,’ like if there was a fight up the block, away from school, we’ll be like, ‘What happened yesterday? Let’s have a community discussion.’ And students will come up and open up to and even call each other out. So it wasn’t led by the adults right, as like ‘You did this,’ but students were kind of like, ‘We need to protect our community’.”

2. TRANSFORM CULTURE: Restorative justice can feel like a radical change for both youth and adults, representing a “fundamental shift” from a deeply ingrained culture of punishment in schools and society. We heard about many school-specific barriers to changing this mindset, including rigid staff-student hierarchies, “punitive” academics and testing pressures, and schools’ long histories of institutional harm. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can transform school culture and grow restorative justice.

- ▶ Recognize that school culture is multifaceted, and building a restorative culture requires rethinking all punitive aspects of school culture, including high-stakes testing and pressures of teacher evaluation. While administrators have limited power over these aspects of school life, they should actively seek to shift harmful aspects of school culture where possible. This may include pursuing creative strategies to build restorative justice work into existing school structures (professional development days, advisory, creating a restorative justice class, etc.), instead of asking staff to develop restorative justice through unpaid labor.
- ▶ Institute a restorative justice action team of staff, students, and parents to guide the development and implementation of restorative justice in the school, ensuring there is a critical mass of people within the school pushing this work forward, rather than a single individual or an external group. This group should be compensated for their time, or be able to participate during the course of their normal duties, not as an unpaid additional responsibility, or volunteer work.
- ▶ Use restorative circles in staff meetings and professional development to increase staff comfort and familiarity with the practices, foster staff buy-in, and normalize staff participation in restorative processes before beginning to use circle practices with students and families. This must include leadership participation.
- ▶ Develop restorative justice conversations and practice through community building efforts, building community trust and buy-in, before using restorative practices to respond to specific moments of harm.
- ▶ Assure that teaching staff and administrators actively participate in circles alongside students, breaking hierarchical norms within the community. By building buy-in with staff, it ensures the growth of restorative justice as a community wide practice that is also breaking traditional structural norms
- ▶ Leadership must build in time and settings to unpack ideas about discipline, learn about the school-to-prison pipeline, look at relevant NYC and school-based data (e.g., on suspensions and disparities), and how it all connects to growing restorative justice in schools. While these conversations should begin with school staff, they should grow to include students and their families.

Lily T. (she/hers), school staff: “Really [building restorative or transformative justice], it’s all relationship stuff. For example, one student who was a part of the young TJ [transformative justice] crew, he was newish and he hadn’t felt confidence to take any leadership roles as a 9th grader... He was also the only Muslim student in the young TJ crew at that time and he said that he wanted to do a peer to peer circle after the shootings that happened in mosques in New Zealand... and I supported him, co-planning it, and he identified some friends, to co-plan with him... [for the talking piece], he brought in his personal Quran and that gesture in him explaining to people how to do that talking piece different from how they typically use talking pieces, and then other Muslim students seeing a Muslim student is leading this...He was super hooked after that, and I definitely noticed an increase in the participation and requests for leadership roles that our Muslim students and our West African students specifically made after that circle. Or, [in general] we do a circle and... most of the people that showed up to a circle were the [student facilitator’s]” friend group and they all participated and I’ve never seen them participate in any other realm in our school community.”

3. PRIORITIZE RACIAL JUSTICE: Anti-racist and anti-oppressive approaches must be woven into all aspects of school culture and restorative justice, not as a one-off conversation or standalone training. Restorative justice is strongest and most liberatory when we honor its indigenous roots and do the work of reckoning with interconnected forms of oppression and inequity, and how they show up in interpersonal conflict and harm. Failure to do so will limit the impact of restorative justice and may cause further harm to school communities and specifically youth who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color). Here are specific ideas about how school communities can prioritize racial justice.

- ▶ Provide in-house training and reflection space that accents larger anti-racism and anti-oppression training, to ensure that the conversation of anti-oppression is not a one-time training, but an ongoing dialogue. Restorative justice staff and administrators should receive additional, intensive training about using restorative justice to address racist or other identity-based harm in schools.
- ▶ Incorporate teaching and discussion about the indigenous roots of restorative practices and values in any training and community education about restorative justice.
- ▶ Prioritize hiring BIPOC and multilingual staff at every level of the school community, including administration, teaching staff, and support roles such as social workers, restorative justice coordinators, and guidance counselors.

- ▶ Implement culturally-sustaining curricula, with young people involved in the planning and teaching of lessons that reflect them and their experiences.
- ▶ Use community-building spaces (e.g., advisory, staff meeting) to process experiences of racism and other forms of oppression, and to help increase student and staff comfort in having these community conversations.
- ▶ Create student-directed opportunities to learn about systems of oppression (racism, misogyny, colonialism, etc.) and social justice issues that matter to students, including open conversations about their impacts alongside imagining what possibilities the future can hold if we address them. This may include student-led community building circles or town halls on these topics.

Love M. (she/her), school staff: “We’ve been doing RJ for like 10 years, but kind of hodgepodge and it’s messy work, so it was all over the place. When we became [involved with a racial equity initiative] and we started looking at numbers and data of suspension and the racism that’s actually in schools, and who’s getting suspended and all of these things in our [monthly program] workshops... We’d had the ability to look at texts and talk about racism in school and how this definitely supports what we want to do as a restorative justice school... Even students are having a conversation about prejudice and racism and discrimination and the disproportionality in our school... We have this conversation with kids openly... because children also need to understand why this work is necessary... More teachers started asking for circles... Circles to address harm when it happened in their classroom... And I think that was in correlation to the data that was coming out of the DOE around our school, and what happens in schools around race and racism. So I think teachers wanted to make an additional effort. Teachers were coming to ask about their lesson plans, like is this culturally responsive? So everyone was now on alert, like these things are happening. We’re not just talking about them. We want them implemented in our school.”

4. MAKE RITUALS AND RELATIONSHIPS: Weaving restorative justice into the fabric of school life helps build community, increase comfort with restorative justice practices and values, and grow capacity for healing-centered responses to harm. Participants spoke about the importance of making restorative justice a “ritual” by designating time and physical space for youth and adults to use restorative practices in day-to-day school life. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can build rituals and relationships.

- ▶ Integrate community-building circles into the routine for all students, staff, and families (via student advisory, staff meetings, family events, etc.) to foster the development of relationships and familiarity with restorative justice practices in a non-conflict setting.
- ▶ Use advisory as a consistent space to center student needs and voices in the classroom, integrating student co-facilitation of community-building circles.
- ▶ Encourage staff to model vulnerability, talking about feelings, asking for help, and learning from mistakes in front of colleagues, students, and their families, in circles and other interactions.
- ▶ Center student-leadership in community-building efforts with other young people and in intergenerational spaces.
- ▶ Provide consistent communication to the whole school community publicizing upcoming community events, leadership opportunities, and the growth of restorative justice practices.

Raphie S. (she/her), school staff: “The school where [we] had more of an RJ foundation everywhere, we had a really strong advisory program, every day first period and a real social emotional learning space. And all the advisories had two advisors, one person whose background was more youth development and the other who was an academic teacher, who were partnered to work with these same 20-25 students for their full four years. So the relationships formed were pretty substantive, usually over time. And we had a pretty strict no switching policy. And so people really had to learn how to live with each other because you couldn’t just switch up... Advisory met in circles and checked in every morning, and had a lot of really strong existing rituals that you did every day, regardless. And so when something really upsetting or traumatizing or disruptive would happen [in the school community], there was a lot of built in space.... students knew that they were going to have a space to talk about it... at the beginning of the day. That was really powerful.”

5. REIMAGINE SAFETY, TOGETHER: Safety is built on trusting relationships, open communication, and mutual support, and calls for the participation of everyone in the school community—because how we define safety is deeply personal. Youth (and adults!) told us they felt safe when they felt heard, seen, valued, and supported by those around them. Young people, educators, and parents were clear that physical safety and emotional safety are deeply interconnected—and that both are required for students to be able to learn and grow. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can reimagine safety, together.

- ▶ Engage in a collective process with school staff, students, and their families every year to build community values and agreements for members of the school community. Special attention should be paid to student experiences and ideas, and there should be ongoing community reflection about how agreements and school rules are being upheld, including challenges and places for growth.
- ▶ Ensure that key community spaces, including school leadership meetings and student advisories, include regular discussions with parents, students, and educators about safety in the school community, including definitions of safety, current needs, personal experiences, and ideas for promoting safety in the school community.
- ▶ Incorporate safety and accountability into all job or role descriptions in the school community (not defined through means of policing), demonstrating how safety is created and maintained by the entire community.
- ▶ Develop and publicize a list of mental health resources and social supports in your school and neighborhood, with the participation of students, families, and local community partners.

Nori R. (she/her), school staff: “Having students create community norms, community agreements. Having them decide what feels safe for them as opposed to you thinking you know what’s going to be safe.”

Morgan L. (she/her), school staff: “Emotionally, whatever is being modeled by the staff, students internalize. So teachers and other staff members don’t feel emotionally safe in the school, if it feels very punitive or if it feels high stakes...I think that trickles down to the students. So I think you have to create a culture amongst staff of emotional safety. And I think... building school wide norms as staff members is really important to create a sense of safety in the school.”

6. RESPOND TO HARM AS A COMMUNITY: Restorative justice invites all community members to respond to harm and support each other in healing. Such community-wide efforts are stronger and more sustainable, drawing on the many relationships, distinct wisdom, and capacity (including time!) of staff, students, their families and neighbors. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can respond to harm restoratively, as a community.

- ▶ Create a simple, accessible process for anybody in the school community to request a circle, with designated people and time to respond to those requests.
- ▶ Determine who in the community is the best fit for facilitating each response to harm (one-on-one preparation conversations, mediations, circles) based on a range of factors, including relationships, facilitator strengths, capacity, and availability.
- ▶ Develop clear steps for before, during, and after circles, to support transparency and follow-up. This may include, but is not limited to: sharing facilitation questions with participants before circles (get consent); asking about needs of those involved and map out potential supports (center healing); determining the best suited facilitator and support people (build on relationships); and designating accountability partners and key dates for follow-up on action steps after a circle is complete (seek transformation).
- ▶ Discuss privilege, oppression, and other relevant institutional or structural forces in preparing and facilitating restorative circles, considering the ways in which these structural forces and related personal experiences may be important to understanding the specific instance of harm, and for those involved to feel their experiences are being acknowledged and taken seriously.
- ▶ Convene as a school quarterly to expand on possibilities of non-punitive responses to harm that have shown to be supportive of student, staff, and community growth. This should be facilitated by restorative justice leaders within the school, and should be both public to the community and transparent in planning its responses.

Lily T. (she/her), school staff: “We have only one kid who’s Jewish in the whole school. He’s also the only white kid who is not Albanian.... it wasn’t from the student, but other students wanted to do a tier two circle after the violence at synagogues. And a bunch of our Jewish staff showed up and they were so thankful that our students have chosen to create that healing space for the whole community and that they got to talk about things. And also our Jewish staff wanted specifically to talk about the issue of racial solidarity. And how there are parallels between the violence, and that was really meaningful for our kids to hear some of their Jewish elders.”

7. DEMOCRATIZE SCHOOLS: The deeply democratic and relational approach of restorative justice pushes up against the clear hierarchy most of us have experienced in schools. For restorative justice to thrive, we need to radically rethink power dynamics in schools. Giving students more respect and power was seen by youth and adults as one of the biggest changes needed to make restorative justice stronger in our schools. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can shift power dynamics and try to build more democratic school cultures.

- ▶ Create opportunities for staff and students to jointly plan and facilitate intergenerational community building circles (e.g., on community norms and agreements), co-facilitate responses to staff-student conflict, and provide training on restorative justice to youth and adult members of the student community.
- ▶ Ensure that teaching staff and administrators actively participate in circles alongside students, breaking hierarchical norms within the community and helping institute circles as a community-wide, democratic practice.
- ▶ Host regular town halls or other meetings for administration to listen to needs, concerns, and ideas of staff. When administration is able to hold the needs of their staff, it increases the capacity of staff to hold the needs of their students.
- ▶ Involve young people and their families at every decision making space that impacts their experiences in the school community, such as the school leadership team, school safety meetings, grade team meetings, restorative justice action team meetings.
- ▶ Check out Let Youth Lead and Build with Families & Neighbors for more ideas about how to give students and families a bigger say in their school communities

Lou T. (she/her), school staff: “A student and staff pair of mediators would mediate student-staff conflicts, which were far more common in our school than student-student conflicts, partially because we’re a transfer school (with unique schedules)... And so there literally is just less opportunity for young people to have conflicts with one another, but there are plenty of opportunities to have conflicts with staff and with mentors... And so the student-staff mediation pairs mediating conflicts between staff and students felt really successful and effective and in the end, both the mediators themselves felt positive outcomes, and so did the folks who were in conflict.”

8. LET YOUTH LEAD: Student-led restorative justice work was described by youth and adults as uniquely effective in transforming conflict, growing youth leadership, building community buy-in, and enhancing student feelings of safety—with broad agreement that we need much more of this. Meaningful youth leadership in restorative justice and throughout school life demands that adults strike a careful balance of providing support and stepping back, guarding against tokenistic or superficial student involvement. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can grow student leadership

- ▶ Integrate peer mentorship within the school culture generally and restorative justice specifically, with young people sharing skills, knowledge, and support with other young people (i.e., [Peer Group Connection](#) model of older students supporting younger students as they transition into high school).
- ▶ Support all students in learning to facilitate community building circles as a routine part of school culture (e.g., in advisory, or classroom discussions), growing leadership skills and relationships among student.
- ▶ Train interested students to facilitate restorative circles and provide other forms of support in response to harm, expanding capacity to respond to harm within schools, as well as fostering youth leadership in restorative justice beyond the school community. Some schools have structured these efforts as an elective class or internship.
- ▶ Support and compensate staff in facilitating youth leadership development, via advisory or other classes, rather than as responsibilities tacked on to their teaching positions.

April A. (she/her), school staff: “I’m an advisor of... an elective for our 12th graders at our school where they facilitate activities with ninth graders once per week. And so we consider this a huge tier one program for our school.... But last year was the first year of [12th grade student leaders who also took the class] when they were 9th graders... That whole year... was, for me, the reflection of our restorative and transformative justice practices really coming to fruition. Because these students were referring to what it was like when they were 9th graders, how important it was to them to have someone like a 12th grader or an upperclassman or just someone who’s on their level, who is practicing these things and these values of restorative and transformative justice. And I see that again starting this year.”

9. BUILDING WITH FAMILIES & NEIGHBORS: Youth, parents, and staff told us that one of the major aims of using restorative justice in schools is for youth to engage restoratively in all contexts: family, friendship, career, and community. Including students’ families in restorative processes can have cascading effects, strengthening the depth and reach of restorative justice within schools and beyond. Yet, there are many challenges to parent participation in schools, from highly practical issues like family work schedules and language barriers, to deeply personal challenges, such as the trying experience of being a BIPOC parent navigating institutional and interpersonal racism in the school system. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can build with families and neighbors.

- ▶ Integrate parents and family members into community building and response to harm circles, including time outside of the school day that is accessible to parents. Making this possible requires taking into account family members’ work schedules, the availability of translation services, and the impact of community members coming into contact with and navigating interactions with school safety agents and metal detectors, and the nature of specific students’ relationships with their family members.
- ▶ Integrate restorative practices like community circles within non-disciplinary contexts such as PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences or parent-teacher reading groups, providing opportunities for parents to engage in storytelling and reflection on behalf of their own lived experiences.
- ▶ Offer restorative justice and circle training to parents, and provide opportunities for parents to facilitate circles within the school community, with young people, staff, and other parents as co-facilitators.
- ▶ Co-create resources with students, families, and community leaders documenting community spaces, people and resources within them, and how to access them.
- ▶ Incorporate conversations into community building and response to harm circles that involve reflection on relationships outside of the school and how the growth and learning that takes place in circle applies in the community at-large.

Morgan L. (she/her), school staff: “Each advisor was ‘responsible’ for 12 students so that made the parent-to-staff member ratio really small.... Parents felt like they could connect or reach out to someone right away if there was any big news updates... because you’re building a relationship with that particular family.... As an advisor, I was constantly communicating with the family about what was going on, the good and the bad things... that parent or family felt comfortable reaching out to me, following up with me... So I think that really allowed me to dive deeper with my parents and our school to dive deeper with parent relationships because we were building trust through being consistent with them.”

10. INVEST IN CARE, DIVEST FROM HARM: Budgets speak plainly about priorities, and restorative justice has never been fully resourced. To build genuinely restorative school cultures, funding must reflect restorative values, with a major reallocation of funds into staffing and supports to promote community and care, not policing and punishment. While there is much to be done on a structural and policy level to better resource schools in the longer-term, participants highlighted how school administrators play a make-or-break role in the short-term. Here are specific ideas about how school communities can reconfigure existing school-based resources to support restorative justice and healing-centered schools.

- ▶ Allocate time and resources towards community building, restorative justice, and social and emotional support within the school, and away from punishment—building such time and support into the regular school schedule. While they have limited say over many areas of school funding and requirements, administrators should seek out creative strategies to build restorative justice work into existing school structures (professional development days, advisory, creating a restorative justice class, etc.), and seek opportunities for additional funding and resources. This can include knowledge sharing between school communities about the ways they have repurposed existing resources to support restorative justice work. Increase transparency about how money is spent in schools—including the budget for metal detectors and NYPD-employed School Safety Agents—with clear communication about what school leaders can and can’t control. Include opportunities for school community members to share thoughts on the current budget, brainstorm what they would change if it were up to them, and share ideas about how any existing flexible funding should be used in the school community.
- ▶ Offer space for community discussions and dialogues on the citywide education budget, and budget allocated to NYPD-employed School Safety Agents and metal detectors. While the budget is public info, it is not necessarily accessible info, and bringing it into schools can increase the power of young people, parents, and families to take part in further advocacy.

Louise F. (she/her), school staff: “I work for an outside organization that works in schools... As a result of the pandemic and uprisings... staff said we really need space to slow down and unpack and think about how we’re going to incorporate this [context] into our work with each other and with young people. And [our leadership] responded and gave us that space, so it doesn’t have to happen at five, at six, when you’re off the clock. But we’re actually going to dedicate certain days to running workshops for all staff, allowing us to do working groups or affinity groups, whatever it is... Having leadership say, ‘This is work time.’ ...We’re not saying it’s unnecessary or additional, we’re saying that it’s actually integral to your work with young people and in our schools.”