On Our Terms

A vision for community-led restorative justice, safety, and healing in schools
Acknowledgements

On Our Terms is rooted in knowledge created in and through a rich constellation of healing and movement work: the Indigenous practices of people across the globe that have shaped our understanding of restorative justice; the abolitionist organizing of past and present that encourages us to imagine and build the world we want to see; and many intersectional struggles for liberation, including Black Lives Matter, queer and trans liberation movements, disability justice movements, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, the fight for educational justice—the list goes on. We are grateful for all of these teachings and our hope is that this work is in conversation with these broader movements, and that we are able to contribute in our small way.

On Our Terms is incredibly grateful to the youth, school staff, and parents who generously shared their stories and visions for change during our focus groups. Thank you for digging into the contradictions, challenges, and triumphs in this work, and helping shape a path for moving forward. Your insight, imagination, and expertise are on every page.

The main authors of this report are the co-organizers of On Our Terms, Talia Sandwick, research consultant for Teachers Unite, and Anooj Bhandari, Senior Coordinator of Training and Youth Programming at Restorative Justice Initiative. A special thank you to the On Our Terms focus group facilitator crew for all of your work in focus group facilitation and data analysis: Luciana Batkay, Shaquille (Shaq) Benn, Jannette (Jan) Estudillo Hernandez, Daniel (Herm) Jerome, Byron Lee, and Tim Metzger. While Talia and Anooj did the bulk of the writing in this report and on the website, these products are the result of the collective labor, insight, expertise, vision, and commitment of the entire On Our Terms community who contributed to designing and carrying out our participatory action research and analysis since our foundational Summer Institute. While individual participation ebbed and flowed over time, each of one you played an irreplaceable role in our collective work:


Our report and website are deeply enriched by the Vent Diagrams project of artist-activist Rachel Schragis and educator-activist E.M. Eisen-Markowitz (and long-time On Our Terms community member!). Thank you for creating and so graciously sharing this generative tool so well-suited to working through the tensions of building restorative justice in schools, and for giving us permission to integrate it so deeply into the ideas and aesthetic showcased in the report and website.

This report and website were made possible by the staff and organizational support of Restorative Justice Initiative, Teachers Unite, Dignity-in-Schools Campaign - New York, and the Public Science Project. An extra special thank you to Rebecca Del Toro, a co-creator of On Our Terms and co-organizer of the Summer Institute.

The Spanish translation of On Our Terms was made possible through our collaboration with Annabelle Berrios. A tremendous thank you to Annabelle for approaching translation from the vantage point of a restorative justice practitioner, engaging with the liveliness of the texts with curiosity and excitement, and being such a flexible, kind member of our team.

Finally, a huge thank you to Abigail Miller, the designer of this report and the onourterms.nyc website. We are forever grateful for your collaborative spirit and your capacity to take our vision and turn it into reality-creating a platform for our findings and action that holds the complexity, beauty, and transformative potential of restorative and healing-centered schools. And thank you to the many youth, educators, parents and organizers who provided feedback on the website and report. Your critical love has made these products more useful and compelling.
Executive Summary

“The problem with schools is that they are too hierarchical, and I’m a big advocate for seeing democratic schools... you need to have student voice. It needs to be a process of involving everyone in the community to really shape their vision of the school. So I don’t think it can be done in one day... [or] in just a conversation with a principal. I think it’s from the ground up really shaping, creating, co-creating a school.”

- Coltrane D.*, New York City educator

Long before the recent rise in popularity of restorative justice, pockets of educators, youth and parent activists, and community organizers had been growing restorative practice in schools for years—even if not by name, and often at odds with official disciplinary policies. Their push for restorative justice has always been just one part of a broader fight for educational justice, dismantling the school-to-prison-pipeline, and building affirming, supportive, and liberatory spaces of learning for all young people.

For these school communities and organizers, watching restorative justice move from the activist margins into formal education policy is both a cause for celebration and anxiety. We see schools simultaneously as a site of historic and ongoing systemic harm against already marginalized young people and an unrelinquished site of liberatory promise, however flawed. For those deeply invested in restorative justice in New York City, there is anxiety about how restorative justice might be watered-down or co-opted so its transformative potential is stripped away, or that the political lip-service to restorative justice won’t translate into the school-level investment it requires.

On Our Terms emerged from this moment of tension and possibility, as an effort to collectively address these anxieties and ensure that New York City youth, educators, and families were at the center of the conversation about restorative justice in schools. Founded as a collaboration of Restorative Justice Initiative, Teachers Unite, Dignity in Schools Campaign - New York, and the Public Science Project, On Our Terms set out to build a critical participatory action research project with deep roots in citywide educational justice organizing and restorative school communities.

* Names have been changed to protect the identities of participants in our research.
This project is our way of taking back the conversation about restorative justice and safety in schools, to ensure that the students, educators, and parents who have been building this work all along are at the center of decision-making about educational policy and practice. Through the onourterms.nyc virtual resource and this companion report, On Our Terms works to paint a clear and honest picture of what this work looks like in schools, offering an actionable resource for students, families, school staff, advocates, and policymakers to be able to build sustainable restorative justice practices across New York City schools and communities. Join us to find out what restorative justice and healing-centered schools can look like when it’s On Our Terms.

Our Research

Our critical participatory action research (CPAR) project was created by a diverse group of New York City youth, school staff, parents, organizers, and academic researchers from all five boroughs. With ties to educational justice movements and schools using restorative justice, this intergenerational group brought varied forms of expertise to every stage of our research, including research questions, design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Together, we built a research project to understand what it takes to build deeply safe, restorative, and healing-centered school cultures.

We held 12 online focus group sessions (and one interview) with a racially and ethnically diverse group of youth, school staff, and parents who self-identified as having experience with restorative or transformative justice in middle or high schools in New York City. Our youth and adult co-facilitators spoke to 46 participants across six youth focus groups, five school staff focus groups, one parent focus group, and one parent interview. Participants were asked questions about their experiences and opinions about restorative justice, school safety, school culture and climate, and community accountability, and they were encouraged to engage as a group. The ten themes and relevant recommendations in this report were identified through a cyclical process of independent and collective analysis of the focus group transcripts by members of the On Our Terms team.

Our Findings

THEMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL PRACTICE

On Our Terms developed the ten themes below from our reflection and analysis. Based on countless hours of storytelling and reflection with youth, parents, and educators across New York City, On Our Terms developed ten themes—or big takeaways—about what it takes to build deeply safe, restorative, and healing-centered schools. Our report and website include concrete ideas for how we can integrate each theme into our schools communities, and the structural policy changes needed to make it happen.

1. **CENTER HEALING AND RELATIONSHIPS**: Students, staff, and parents 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. In this light, participants emphasized the foundational role of strong relationships in fostering supportive, healing-centered school cultures and restorative justice—and the necessity of prioritizing community building in schools.

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—as well as concrete strategies for how to move forward.

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 within and beyond school walls. Failure to do so will limit the impact of restorative justice and may cause further harm to school communities generally, and specifically youth who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

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.

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. And 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.

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.

7. **DEMOCRATIZE SCHOOLS:** The deeply democratic and relational approach of restorative justice pushes up against the clear hierarchy that 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 strengthen restorative justice in our schools.
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.

9. **BUILD 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 affecting challenges, such as the trying experience of being a BIPoC parent navigating institutional and interpersonal racism in the school system.

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. There is much to be done on a structural and policy level to better resource schools in the longer-term, as described below, but participants also highlighted how school administrators play a make-or-break role in the short-term.

### Our Policy Demands

**INVEST IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE & HEALING-CENTERED SCHOOLS**

Growing out of the vision and recommendations of our focus group participants, we created a series of policy demands about the transformational, systems-level change we need in order to build safe, restorative, and healing-centered schools. We believe that restorative justice policy needs to be enacted restoratively, from staffing to funding, to ensure that youth, families, and teachers, and staff have the power to reimagine school communities. These demands fall into four key areas outlined below, and are described in full in the report and on our website.

- **HIRE NEW YORKERS: Restorative Justice Comes from Our Communities.** For restorative justice to thrive across schools, we must ensure schools have the human resources needed to make the broad culture shift from punitive to healing-centered practice possible. We must better compensate and honor the frequently unpaid or underpaid youth, educators, and support staff already leading this work in schools, and hire more New Yorkers.

- **END COOKIE-CUTTER TRAININGS: Restorative Justice Education is a Community Undertaking.** Widely-accessible and ongoing education and reflection about restorative justice encourages continuous growth and development within school communities. Moving
beyond professional development as usual, participants called for more holistic, democratic training which builds on the expertise of existing staff, student, and parent practitioners and leaders.

▶ **INVEST IN SAFE SCHOOLS: Healing Takes Time and Resources.** Upwards of $425 million per year is directed to fund school policing and security infrastructure like metal detectors and NYPD-employed School Safety Agents, contributing to a culture of policing and surveillance of students that interferes with efforts to build restorative schools. We need a funding model that embodies the cultural transformation we are seeking: divesting from punishment and policing, and investing in prevention via social supports and community building, and restorative, healing-centered responses to harm.

▶ **RETHINKING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE POLICY: Towards a Relationship-Centered Process.** Restorative justice cannot be enacted through top-down policy mandates alone; for authentic and meaningful change. It is critical that school community members—students, their families, educators and school staff—are key decision makers in the systems and institutions that shape their lives.

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**CHECK OUT ONOURTERMS.NYC: A VIRTUAL RESOURCE & TOOLKIT**

This is a companion report and toolkit for onourterms.nyc. The website includes all of the findings, recommendations, and tools in this report in an engaging and easy-to-navigate format, and features additional quotes from focus groups (including audio!), specific policy recommendations for each theme, and additional resources about restorative justice and educational justice movements. We especially recommend using the website in spaces with youth, including classroom and organizing settings.
Introduction

After years of relentless organizing, the movement for restorative justice has been gaining momentum in schools and education policy across the country. This represents a departure from a decades-long national trend of schools relying on surveillance, securitization, and “zero-tolerance” suspensions, expulsions—and even arrests—as disciplinary measures. These policies had devastating consequences, with research documenting many harmful outcomes for suspended students: worse academic performance, higher rates of dropout/pushout, and increased likelihood of future involvement with the criminal legal system, contributing to what’s commonly referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (STPP). With disproportionately high rates of suspension for Black, Latinx, and Native American students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, and English Language Learners, these young people shoulder the burden of these harmful approaches to school discipline. At the same time, suspension is not shown to increase safety in the broader school community, decrease student misbehavior, or lead to academic gains for non-suspended students.

It is with this backdrop of advocacy and research that policymakers have increased focus on decreasing school exclusion and promoting non-punitive approaches to school conflict. For instance, the Departments of Education and Justice issued national guidance in 2014 for decreasing school exclusion, increasing approaches like restorative justice, and addressing disparities by race and disability. And in 2015 under Mayor de Blasio, New York City’s Department of Education (NYC DOE) began calling for revising disciplinary codes, decreasing suspension, expanding mental health supports in schools, and increasing restorative justice. In 2019, the NYC DOE announced further efforts to increase funding and access to restorative justice, social supports, and anti-bias training to more New York City schools and educators. While education justice organizers viewed this move as an important victory, they also saw it as just the first of many steps the city could take to deepen its commitment to racial justice and healing in schools.

Many of these policy efforts have included a call to expand restorative justice—a central demand for many education justice activists. With roots in certain Indigenous practices, restorative justice is a relational approach to conflict with the goals of addressing root causes of conflict,
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repairing harm, and fostering democratic, collective forms of accountability.\textsuperscript{8,9} A limited but growing body of research suggests that restorative justice enhances school climate and student engagement, and decreases fighting, bullying, and suspensions.\textsuperscript{10}

Long before its recent rise in popularity, pockets of educators, youth and parent activists, and community organizers were already growing restorative practice in schools—even if not by name, and often at odds with official disciplinary policies. Their push for restorative justice has always been just one part of a broader fight for educational justice and building affirming, supportive, and liberatory spaces of learning for all young people. And notably, the recent policy shifts do not address advocacy demands to divest from police and surveillance measures (metal detectors, cameras) in schools, which are key drivers of the school-to-prison pipeline.

And so, for them, the movement of restorative justice from the margins into formal education policy is both a cause for celebration and anxiety. We see schools simultaneously as a site of historic and ongoing systemic harm against already marginalized young people and an unrelinquished site of liberatory promise, however flawed. For those deeply invested in restorative justice in New York City, there was anxiety about: the conflation of decreasing suspensions and implementing restorative justice (interconnected ideas, but not the same); the watering-down of demands for holistic restorative justice culture change into decontextualized “tools” or one-off trainings; and, the co-optation of restorative justice for punitive purposes; and how the constant need to defend the place of restorative justice in schools can take energy away from our collective capacity to address challenges and sticking points in restorative practice (e.g., power dynamics in schools, ongoing racial disparities) within our communities.

On Our Terms emerges from this moment of tension and possibility. With these questions looming, Restorative Justice Initiative brought together Teachers Unite, the Public Science Project, and The Dignity in Schools Campaign-New York to consider how we might collectively address these anxieties and ensure that New York City youth, educators, and families were at the center of the conversation about restorative justice in schools. Together, we set out to build a critical participatory action research project with deep roots in citywide educational justice organizing and restorative school communities.

This project is our way of taking back the conversation about restorative justice and safety in schools, to ensure that the students, educators, and parents who have been building this work all along are at the center of decision-making about educational policy and practice. What would restorative justice and healing-centered schools look like, if they were On Our Terms?

\textsuperscript{8} Connecting restorative justice to Indigenous practice is both common and contentious. This framing is critiqued as a flattening or erasure of diversity across Indigenous groups, romanticizing (e.g., obscuring violence within indigenous conflict), or as reinforcing settler-colonial framings of Indigeneity as in “the past.” On the other hand, a failure to acknowledge these roots or to do so in a superficial way is critiqued as appropriation (Breton, 2012; Cunneen, 2004; Meiners, 2016).

\textsuperscript{9} Fronius et al., 2016; Morrison, 2003; Zehr, 2014.

\textsuperscript{10} Evans & Lester, 2013; Sandwick, Hahn, & Ayoub, 2019; Schiff, 2018.
Our Research

A vision for community-led restorative justice, safety, and healing in schools

On Our Terms is a critical participatory action research (CPAR) project built by a diverse group of over 30 New York City youth, school staff, parents, and organizers committed to restorative justice, ending the school-to-prison-pipeline, and fighting for educational justice. Formed through the networks of Restorative Justice Initiative, Teachers Unite, Dignity in Schools Campaign - New York, and the Public Science Project, we have deep roots in educational justice movements and schools using restorative justice throughout New York City. Together, we built a research project to understand what it takes to build deeply safe, restorative, and healing-centered school cultures.

Critical Participatory Action Research

Rooted in the belief that we are all experts in our own lives, On Our Terms took a CPAR approach to center the expertise of those in educational justice movements and/or in school communities using restorative justice. Working with (not “on” or “for”) those with lived experience in these spaces, our intentionally diverse and intergenerational team members offer unique forms of expertise (experiential, professional, academic) to shape every stage of our research, including research questions, design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. In doing so, CPAR increases the rigor and impact of our research: deepening our understanding of the challenges and solutions we want to study; strengthening the relevance of our research methods; and increasing our opportunities for research-informed action.¹

And throughout this work, the “critical” of CPAR reminds us to always consider individual experience in the context of structural dynamics, demanding that we attend to power and privilege in our research—and within the research team. In addition, our deep roots with restorative school communities and educational justice movements has helped us shape this research project to maximize its impact in schools and advocacy.²

And in the context of this project, there is a deep resonance between restorative justice and CPAR, as both center relationship building, see conflict as a learning opportunity, value democratic participation, and the need to think about transformation at both individual and systemic levels. Some key features of our CPAR project included:

▶ A foundational, intensive Summer Institute that brought together this group for six days of community building, theorizing, research design, and methods.

¹ Sandwick et al., 2018; Torre et al., 2012.
Deep roots in grassroots organizations engaged with educational justice movements and school communities using restorative justice—building on existing relationships, practice, and advocacy efforts.

Intergenerational, non-hierarchical collaboration among youth, educators, parents, and activists, who are too often pitted against each other in narratives about discipline and safety in schools.

Weaving restorative ethics and practices into our collaborative research process.

Team diversity with respect to age (14 to 60+), race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, class, borough, language spoken at home, religion—and in many other ways, like background in education, activism, and restorative justice.

An “accordion” model of participation, with members of the On Our Terms community coming together for critical moments of decision making and collective work around design, data collection, analysis, and product creation—and the project organizers carrying the work forward in between these collective sessions.

You can find out much more about the On Our Terms team, participatory process, and values on our website: [onourterms.nyc](http://onourterms.nyc).

Research Questions

Since its outset, On Our Terms has been driven by two overarching questions:

What does restorative justice look like when it’s deep “in the bones” of the culture of a school, when it’s working the way we dream it could? How do we get there?

Through the work of our Summer Institute, we collectively drafted a series of related but more specific research aims and questions:

1. **DEFINING SAFETY**: How do we build safer, more supportive schools? What does safety mean to school communities using restorative justice?

2. **UNDERSTANDING ACCOUNTABILITY**: What are school communities’ goals in responding to conflict through restorative justice? What does meaningful accountability look like – for individuals, schools, systems?

3. **CREATING BUY-IN**: How do we build understanding of and trust in restorative justice?

4. **WORKING THROUGH CHALLENGES**: What are the challenges of restorative justice? How do you overcome them?

5. **MAPPING POWER IN RESTORATIVE JUSTICE**: Who decides what restorative looks like in schools and across New York City? Who should? How do power dynamics play out in restorative justice processes and who has access to restorative approaches?
These questions informed the design of our data collection, including who participated in the focus groups and the collective work of drafting and revising our interview and focus group questions. It is these very questions that weave throughout our findings, in our themes and recommendations.

Focus Groups

Our research was committed to learning from the expertise and insight of school communities already engaged with restorative or transformative justice. With this goal, we held 12 online focus group sessions (and one interview) with youth, school staff, and parents who self-identified as having experience with restorative or transformative justice in middle or high schools in New York City. We reached out to participants through the networks of Teachers Unite, Restorative Justice Initiative, and Dignity in Schools Campaign - New York, as central hubs for community members building restorative justice in schools.

The focus group discussions were held on zoom and led by members of the On Our Terms facilitation crew, made up of three youth, three educators, and our two project organizers. Typically facilitated by one young person and one adult, we asked questions and fostered a group discussion about participants’ experiences and opinions about restorative justice, school safety, school culture and climate, and community accountability.

WHO WE SPOKE TO

We spoke to 46 participants across six youth focus groups, five school staff focus groups, one parent focus group, and one parent interview, with representation from all five boroughs of New York City. Youth participants included middle school students, high school students, and recent high school alumni. School staff included people who held a range of roles in schools, including classroom teachers, social workers, restorative justice coordinators, and a principal; some people have held more than one of these roles in their careers (and sometimes more than one role at the same time). All participants self-identified as having experience with restorative or transformative justice in schools, so there was a wide range of experience within and across these discussions.

We believe that people should have the power to define themselves, so we asked participants to respond to demographic questions in their own words and provided an open-ended opportunity for participants to share any other aspects of their social identities that they felt were important, such as disability, religion, and migration history. These questions were optional, and participants could skip anything they didn't want to answer. We have included a brief summary of participant demographics on the next page, but we encourage you to check out the more comprehensive information on our website, where you can hear from participants about their identities in their own words; our summaries in general, and for race and ethnicity in particular, do not adequately reflect the multiplicity of ways that people identify themselves.

Almost all participants had experience with restorative justice in public schools, but one student and one educator spoke primarily about their experiences with restorative justice in small, independent charter schools.
Finally, it is important to note that we had a very limited response from eligible parents; despite extensive outreach, we were ultimately only able to speak with three eligible parents. This is due in part to the context of COVID and remote schooling, as well as insufficient capacity within our team to hold focus group discussions in languages other than English. While these discussions we did have with parents were rich and have a great deal to offer, our insight into parents’ experiences is unfortunately limited.

Focus Group Participant Demographics

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<tr>
<th>Youth Participant Demographics (n=22)*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>13-20 years old; median age is 17 years old</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity†</td>
<td>The vast majority of youth identified as BIPoC (n=20), including Black, Latinx, Asian, or having a multi-ethnic and/or multi-racial background; two youth identified as white.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>Most youth identified as female or cisgender women (n=18); two youth identified as nonbinary or genderfluid, and one identified as male.</td>
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<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Youth were pretty evenly divided fairly among those who identified as straight (n=8), LGBTQ+ (n=7), and those that did not respond (n=7).</td>
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<td>Language</td>
<td>12 young people reported speaking at least one language other than American English at home, including Amharic, Bengali, French, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Soninke, and Wolof-English</td>
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* One out of the 23 youth participants did not respond to this demographic survey.
† Recognizing that people’s racial and ethnic identities are complex and often overlapping, we asked a combined, open-ended question: “What’s your race and/or ethnicity?”

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<th>School Staff Participant Demographics (n=19)*</th>
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<td>Age</td>
<td>25-57 years old; median age is 36 years old</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity</td>
<td>More than half of school staff participants identified as white (n=12), with a subset of that group identifying as white and Jewish (n=3). Seven school staff identified as BIPoC, including Black, Latinx, Asian, or having a multi-ethnic and/or multi-racial background.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>Most staff identified as a cisgender female or woman (n=14); three people identified as gender queer or non-binary, and two identified as a cisgender male or man.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Just under half of staff identified as straight or heterosexual (n=9), seven staff identified as LGBTQ+, and four did not respond.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Four staff reported speaking at least one language other than English at home, including Spanish, and Spanglish, and Tetun.</td>
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* One out of the 20 staff participants did not respond to this demographic survey.
Data Analysis

We used the audio recordings of the focus groups to create written transcripts of the discussions. Everyone in the facilitator crew helped with analyzing the transcripts, through a process called “coding,” where we identified common experiences or ideas that came up repeatedly, as well as “outliers” or ideas and experiences that were more unique across participants. We used a collaborative online tool called Annotate.co which made it possible to work independently and collaboratively, as we added our own individual codes and comments and were able to see and respond to the codes and comments of others. We identified the ten themes in this report through a multiple-step iterative process, moving through cycles of independent analysis by Talia and Anooj punctuated by collaborative work with the facilitator crew and members of the broader On Our Terms community.

The remainder of this report describes these ten themes and our recommendations for school practice, followed by overarching recommendations for policy change. In this companion report and the onourterms.nyc virtual resource, On Our Terms works to paint a clear and honest picture of what restorative justice and healing-centered schools can look like when it’s On Our Terms. We offer the findings and tools in this report and on our website as actionable resources for students, families, school staff, advocates, and policymakers to be able to build sustainable restorative justice practices across New York City schools and communities.
Our Findings

Themes & Recommendations for School Practice
1. Center Community & Healing

When we spoke with youth, educators and parents about what restorative justice means to them, they told us it’s a “worldview,” “a way of being,” an entire approach to community that is “deeply entrenched” in the culture of a school. It’s a philosophical stance, envisioning a world where relationships are rooted in the understanding that we are all learning, growing, and healing alongside each other, in and out of conflict. Participants described restorative justice as a holistic approach to community care and healing that builds upon a foundation of relationships, shared values, mutual support, and key practices. Or in Bianca’s words, “It’s unconditional love,” a sense of community belonging and responsibility that does not disappear in moments of conflict, harm, or community struggle.

As a society, we tend to put the spotlight on the “wrong-doer” when harm and conflict occurs, investing our time and energy into punishing that person and removing them from our communities. Rarely, if at all, do we ask people who have been harmed: “What would help you heal? What makes you feel supported? What might help you feel whole?” Restorative justice asks us to do just that, focusing on the healing needs of those harmed, and collectively addressing root causes of how and why such harm occurred in the first place. No one is disposable in this healing-centered approach, as restorative justice seeks to support everyone involved in moving through and healing from this experience: those harmed, those who have caused harm, and our broader communities.

Simply put, restorative justice is relational work. Students,

Lily T. (she/her), school staff:
Relationships are really part of building the momentum for having an actual restorative or transformative culture... Most people, when they show up to a place where they feel welcome, they show up more as themselves, even if they’re not sure who that is yet. And I’m not just talking about kids, I’m talking about staff too.... it’s all these different root connections happening at once, in all these different directions, and the hierarchy starts to peel away... Power dynamics still exist, but we’re able to act more as members of the community, instead of just roles in the community.

Fern X. (she/her), school staff: RJ needs good relationships, and then you do the RJ better, and then the good RJ leads to better relationships.... it’s very cyclical in its nature. And really the goal is this building of relationships and having a community and having people care [when] they’ve harmed the community.
educators, and parents emphasized the central role of strong relationships and supportive communities in restorative justice work specifically, and their school cultures as a whole. Relationship building with consistency and care creates the trust and comfort needed to try something new, speak openly, and believe that others have our best interests at heart. On the other hand, experiencing restorative practices, like community building circles, provides a structure to keep growing with each other in respectful, caring ways. (You can learn more about practical approaches to building relationships in Make Rituals & Relationships.)

It is these supportive, reliable relationships that make youth and adults feel like they can show up as our full, complicated, emotional selves, knowing we'll be cared for and have a role to play in caring for others. For many we spoke to, this is the real transformative potential of restorative justice in our schools. As Nori R. put it, “How do we make space for our voices and our feelings to be heard and validated? And how do we honor where other people are at, and collaboratively move towards where we want to go?”

Arcadia M. (she/her), parent: [The school], they're looking at the whole child... making sure that... they're well in their own body and their own feelings and their emotions and that they're able to express that. That's just as important as what's happening academically... And I always ask my kids, ‘What kind of human do you want to be? What kind of person do you want to be? How do you want to be within your community?’ And ideally, schools would be able to help students figure some of this out.
Build School Practice

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 in what people believe.” As April explained, it can require a lot of unlearning after “growing up in a system that penalizes you for everything,” including experiences at home, in schools, and in society as a whole. Even when teachers are “rhetorically supportive” of restorative justice, many have a hard time putting it into practice when they feel personally disrespected by a student. We heard about many school-specific barriers to changing the punishment mindset, including rigid staff-student hierarchies, “punitive” academics and testing pressures, and schools’ long histories of institutional harm.

With this backdrop, restorative justice asks us to rethink and transform the way that we relate to each other, in and out of conflict. This shift is not just an absence of suspension, but building the robust presence of an entirely new approach to being in community, responding to harm, and seeking healing.

When we asked what made this sort of transformation possible, we heard again and again that relationships are the life force of restorative justice. It is relationships that generate the trust and belonging that makes it possible to be vulnerable, ask for help, admit mistakes, and take accountability. In turn,

April A. (she/her), school staff: “Leadership actually needs to be involved. But the members of the school community have to be stakeholders in the restorative justice process... Parents, students, caretakers, maybe even community members... Because it all comes back to relationships with our young people. And so the big ideas sometimes come from leadership, but [actually doing] it takes a community of folks who are like, ‘We are going to live and breathe and be restorative and transformative justice.’”

Nori R. (she/her), school staff: “Schools that only focus on the students being restorative, but are not restorative with the adults... it’s harder for them to implement that with their students, because they’re not practicing what they’re preaching... [But when you do use RJ with adults] you get to experience what it feels like for students to be in a circle, which is not always easy. Because I know I’ve been in circles that I felt uncomfortable, like... ‘Did I overshare? That was scary.’ And so putting yourself in the shoes of the students.”
relationships help us keep moving through the most difficult parts of culture change, like reflecting on personal beliefs about discipline, building buy-in with community members, and working through challenges. And, critically, this work is most successful when it is a community-wide effort. Participants told us how administrator leadership and support is an important ingredient for restorative school cultures to take root, but it is the broad engagement and drive of students, staff, and parents that makes restorative justice thrive.

Transforming culture takes time, care, and patience, but schools are already under-resourced and stretched thin; yet, if our efforts are rushed or truncated, we run the risk of creating a “watered-down version of restorative justice,” that falls away from its indigenous roots and radical potential. Building restorative justice in schools demands a major reallocation of resources and shifts in priorities on the individual, school, and system-wide levels. Keep exploring our recommendations and other themes, including Invest/Divest, to learn more about what those investments should look like.

Summer L. (she/her), school staff: “My challenge is buy-in from… teachers who feel that [restorative justice] is too soft, or we're too lenient or we're giving students too much power... The buy-in is in being able to be open enough to listen, to talk, to engage... It's about changing... the mindset that the way to go is suspension, as opposed to, ‘Can we talk first?’”

The need to end punitive discipline is urgent
Transforming relationships & values takes time
Build School Practice

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, and 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/her), 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 approaches must be integrated into all aspects of school culture and restorative justice practices, not as a one-off conversations or training. If not, the impact of restorative justice will be limited and may cause further harm to school communities and specifically youth who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color).

Camila H. (she/her), parent:
“My family’s still waiting for reparations for the free labor that we gave this country... since the 1700s... So when you talk about restorative justice, you can’t just make it about that incident. I mean, it is about that incident that happened. But it’s also deeper than that, and I think that’s where education comes in and knowing the history behind things... [If you’re] saying there’s no connection there, there’s no restoring anything. It’s just meaningless... If you want to make someone feel whole, it has to be deeper than just a superficial gesture, it has to really go deeper than that.”

Restorative justice has its roots within Indigenous practices, but teaching about the past and present of Indigenous peoples remains limited in most classrooms—even as restorative justice has become an education ‘buzzword.’ There are similar absences in education about systemic oppression and harms that people have been subjected to on the basis of social identities. These silences limit our ability to confront the present with honesty and neglect student needs. Racial, familial, and generational histories of oppression impact how young people show up in the world; if we ignore them, it can prevent us from even speaking about certain forms of harm—and from accessing healing. Restorative justice demands that we reckon with interconnected forms of oppression and inequity, and how they show up in interpersonal conflict and harm.

In our focus groups, there was a specific, pressing call for restorative justice to more meaningfully engage with the ways that racism shows up in our lives, schools, and broader society. Many students and staff spoke about the institutional racism and criminalizing force of School Safety Agents and metal detectors in schools—a daily reminder of racist stereotypes, policing, and surveillance of BIPOC youth in and out of schools.

Students, staff, and parents also described numerous instances of racist harm, as well as harmful expressions of misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and classism by youth and adults alike. Adding to the hurt, several participants spoke about times when they felt like racist harm in school was not responded to with enough care or depth, often causing another layer of harm for
BIPoC students. Nova explained her experience of a community rebuilding circle after a student used racist language: “[The staff] didn’t really know how to handle something so severe in a restorative justice way… Nobody really got to say anything and nobody really got healed.” Some students pointed to majority-white staff as contributing to this issue, naming discomfort or uncertainty about how to talk about race and racism.

A few participants spoke more generally about the “unacknowledged bias” of white staff. Lou explained, “It’s not just the bias itself, it’s the additional layer of actively not wanting to see it and wanting to push it away… [it] took up a lot of time and energy and my own doubt and frustration and anger.” Some students and parents described similar dynamics in their (self-described) racially and economically diverse schools, sensing that white parents and white and/or wealthy students were reluctant to talk about racism and other social justice issues. For instance, Arcadia described quiet pushback on discussions of racism from “very well-meaning white parents, who only want the best for the school—but as long as it just stays the same.”

There was far more emphasis on the specific challenges of white educators teaching majority students of color, but BIPoC staff were not seen as immune to reinforcing oppressive ideologies in schools. Lily described her experience that some BIPoC staff feel the need to be tough on students because “the world’s not going to cut some slack,” behavior which she viewed as “maladaptive” and “limiting,” rather than helpful. In growing anti-oppression dialogue in schools, it is crucial for staff and students to reflect on this tension of preparing BIPoC youth for the world that exists, versus preparing them for the world they want to build.

Importantly, participants were clear that these blatant and subtle experiences of harm were not just the result of a few specific people, but represented a continuation of much broader dynamics of systemic racism and oppression. And, critically, they pointed to the need for individual, community, and institutional change in order to address these issues.

Astra O. (she/her), student:
“Educate students on different kinds of cultures. Because a lot of problems stem from misunderstanding and implicit bias because you’re so used to yourself and your family and your own environments that when you meet somebody who comes from somewhere else… you may have conflicting values, conflicting beliefs, and that’s where a lot of conflicts stem from in general. So maybe if we find a way to teach everyone about all kinds of different people. Because that’s where racism comes from. That’s where homophobia comes from. Transphobia. Ableism. Sexism. If we would find a way to incorporate, ‘Oh here’s the story of Lewis Latimer’… instead of teaching about Thomas Edison, you could end up changing… how all this stuff works.”
With this backdrop, youth, staff, and parents expressed a desire for proactively affirming school cultures for BIPOC students, and students of historically marginalized identities, with curriculum and classroom staff that better reflect the diversity of NYC students. Participants pointed to various ways to build anti-racist school cultures, including widely accessible anti-racist trainings, culturally-sustaining curriculum, hiring more BIPOC classroom staff, collective learning about the school-to-prison pipeline, and youth leadership in community-wide discussions and responses to harm related to racism and oppression.

**Build School Practice**

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.

- 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 & 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.

Many people described the frequent use of talking circles—in school-wide gatherings, classes, community celebrations, etc.—as a key way to get comfortable with sharing emotions and experiences. Through this personal sharing, members of the school community are able to learn more about each other, deepen relationships, and build a stronger sense of community.

Honey B. (she/her), high school student: “[RJ] was kind of instilled in our curriculum, to be able to do a circle... At first it was uncomfortable. To sit down and be like, this is how I feel, this is why I’m upset, or this is why I did this, or this is why what you did upset me or hurt me, and vice versa... Our school is student-led, so all the teachers wanted us to be able to call a circle ourselves... So it was also building us up to that point where we were comfortable enough to be able to ask that to a teacher, another student. Over time, we all got a little bit more comfortable with it. Many, many of us got way more comfortable with it.”

Claire H. (she/her), school staff: “The nature of schools and how busy it is, it’s natural to kind of jump in and try to repair harm, or start from the end... Setting the restorative process up and getting acquainted with circles and the values... It takes time. It’s not something that can just be jumped into and done for the sake of getting it done... Actually taking the time to lay that foundation to establish those beginning steps of values and the guidelines, and then in the long run having it be much more meaningful and impactful... I’ve seen the effect when we don’t do that.”
both communities.” Even the non-hierarchical format of talking circles is a simple way to interrupt the power dynamics in schools, ensuring everyone has a chance to speak.

Restorative practices take getting used to, and we shouldn’t first be introduced to them in the middle of conflict or the aftermath of harm. Ritualizing restorative justice creates regular opportunities to build the relationships, communication skills, and trust (in people and the process!) that enable people to work through conflict and harm when it does occur. For instance, Khione told us how in her middle school, “We have [community building] circles that are used for more than just problems on Friday. And that gets new students used to the idea that there’s a circle that’s used to solve problems.” Critically, the basic experience of participating in a talking circle was seen by many as a key way to build buy-in among the entire school community: youth, staff, and families.

At the same time, participants spoke about many obstacles to this sort of routine and relationship building, including inconsistent staffing, funding, and policy directives, with staffing changes seen as especially disruptive by both staff and students.
Build School Practice

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. (sher/her), school staff: “The school where [we] had more of an RJ foundation everywhere, we had a really strong advisory program, everyday 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. Youth (and adults!) told us they felt safe when they felt heard, seen, valued, and supported by those around them. People spoke about school safety as “a sense of belonging,” “connection,” and “space for vulnerability,” and knowing that you can show up as your “whole self,” without being judged. As Bianca put it, “The thing that makes you feel safe is the relationships.”

This might feel like a big departure from ideas about physical safety as the absence of violence, but 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. Participants directly linked the building of strong relationships and communication skills to violence prevention. Young people especially emphasized the connection between safety and the presence of supportive, relatable school staff who were always ready to listen and help.

Anonymous Student (she/her): “Going through the metal detectors in the morning... I felt very uncomfortable... They like to stereotype Black and Brown students being violent, or always having to carry some sort of weapon... It’s very wrong. At the end of the day, if you want your students to feel safe, then make them feel safe by not... just engraving fear into the thinking... There have been times from other campuses where there has been violence and somebody has brought weapons to school, and that has been alarming for me. So I understand why they have metal detectors. I just don’t necessarily agree with the concept of why they need it. Because students shouldn’t have to live in fear... the school system should take other measures rather than just having metal detectors... They need to hear the students’ opinions... We shouldn’t have an administrator’s opinion or principal’s opinion... See how we feel about it instead of speaking for us.”

At the same time, participants were clear that there is no single definition for safety within a community, and that personal feelings about safety are shaped by our unique identities, experiences, and relationships to power and privilege. With this in mind, youth and adults spoke about the need to engage in ongoing community conversations to develop shared understandings about safety, engaging all school stakeholders and centering student perspectives. As Nori explained, “We don’t always agree, and we don’t all come from the same backgrounds or same circumstances, but when there’s a level of connection there or respect, then that helps safety.”
We also heard about structural forces that make people feel unsafe in school, including the presence of racism, the power that staff have over students, and past “educational trauma” for students, staff, and parents. A number of staff and students also spoke painfully about how metal detectors and school safety agents contributed to young people feeling criminalized and stereotyped in school, on the basis of class and race. It is important to note, however, that some youth said that school safety agents and metal detectors did make them feel safe. Other students grappled with mixed feelings—naming that metal detectors and school safety agents criminalize youth, but not having a sense of how to keep schools safe without them. The school staff we spoke to had more consensus about the negative impact that school safety agents and metal detectors have on their students. This diversity in perspectives reaffirms that the conversation of “what makes us feel safe,” is both essential and ongoing.

Emily R. (she/her), school staff: “The connection between emotional and physical safety… A lot of physical altercations… stem from people not feeling emotionally safe. If you create a space where people feel emotionally safe, like the other types of safety are kind of already built in there… I feel safe when I feel like people see me for my whole self… No one’s going to come at me if I make a mistake or do something wrong, that they’ll nurture me and help guide me through that. But I won’t be chastised or excommunicated if I’m not doing everything right.”

Everyone should feel safe in school

Safety means different things to different people
Build School Practice

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.

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.”

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.”
6. Respond To Harm As A Community

Morgan L. (she/her), school staff: “I’m thinking about normalizing conflict. The idea that restorative practice is absent of problems in a building is not true, we’re humans and conflict does exist... Just normalizing that it will happen and how are we deciding to deal with it so that everybody feels safe? With the understanding that you WILL be in conflict with others... and work from that understanding that conflict won’t be erased, but that there are healthier ways of handling it.”

Restorative justice invites all community members to respond to multiple forms of harm and support each other in healing. Such community-wide efforts are stronger and more sustainable than those led by one or two people, and they dramatically expand the tools we have to address harm, making it possible to draw on the many relationships, distinct wisdom, and capacity (including time!) of staff, students, their families, and neighbors. In particular, we heard from participants about how much is gained when students lead restorative responses to harm in their communities. (Find out more in Let Students Lead.)

Restorative justice asks us to transform how we respond to harm and conflict when it does occur. A few participants emphasized how restorative justice helps communities rethink and “normalize” conflict, recognizing that it is unavoidable, and not a sign of failure or a lack of safety. Acknowledging, as Morgan put it, that “we’re humans and conflict does exist,” restorative justice helps us leverage relationships and key practices to address conflict and harm in ways that promote safety and healing for all involved. Participants were clear that harm can take many forms—interpersonal, institutional, structural, which do not occur in isolation, and aren’t all named by school discipline codes. This recognition helps us move beyond narrow ideas about ‘changing student behavior,” and towards a holistic understanding that everyone in a community (youth and adults) can cause harm and be harmed, and that we all deserve chances to heal and grow.

Restorative justice asks that we focus on the healing needs of those who have been harmed, while also supporting those who have caused harm to take accountability—with action, not just words—to address their unmet needs. This dual focus is an essential part of understanding individual and institutional root causes of why harm happens, and ways to transform it. Many participants described a core belief in their school cultures and restorative practice that people make mistakes, but no one is ever disposable; this mindset transforms these difficult moments
On Our Terms

6. Respond To Harm As A Community

from sources of shame into opportunities for growth and healing. And in doing so, we continue building practices, skills, and knowledge to respond to and prevent harm in the future.

Youth and adults described powerful experiences of the way response-to-harm circles gave them a chance to speak and a chance to listen. We heard about how they walked away with a better understanding of those they were in conflict with, while also feeling heard, respected, and understood by others. As A. Geis explained her experience facilitating a conflict between two students, “We asked the questions of why. One person talked first and the other person has the time to talk… it wasn’t like, you guys are being interrogated or pushed to say that you were wrong. No, it was just sharing how you felt.”

But we also heard about times when people were harmed and did not feel adequately cared for by school staff, creating a second layer of harm. A couple of people felt like a student who caused harm was the main focus of a ‘restorative’ response they experienced, drifting far from the healing promise of restorative justice. A few staff spoke about the delicate dance of restoratively addressing root causes of harm, while making sure not to center people who caused harm—especially when staff capacity is limited.

And staff spoke about the tension of navigating the sometimes blurry line between restorative and punitive responses in schools, with the ongoing presence of suspension. A couple of staff spoke about how they try to maintain a restorative spirit when students are suspended from their schools: making sure the student knows they are very much still a part of the community, by remaining in constant contact, providing supports, and addressing root causes of what happened. Both of these

Raphie S. (she/her), school staff: “When it [restorative justice] was working, it was really, really grounded in relationships and it was really distributed among many adults and students to solve problems… We didn’t have a dean’s office or any one person who held onto discipline. It made it confusing, it made it messy, which a lot of people didn’t like. But I think it was really effective because it required many more people to step up and feel like they were essential parts of resolving conflict.”

Jayda (she/her), student: “I facilitated a lot of circles… Restorative justice isn’t just about taking accountability, it’s about understanding and listening and hearing that you’ve done something that’s caused harm or that has broken a community and you’re committed to repairing it… [in one circle, a student] apologized for the incident, but it wasn’t just about the apology for me… it was the fact that he understood what he’d done—he did, and he took accountability for it.”
On Our Terms

6. Respond To Harm As A Community

Staff said that the temporary physical distance can be helpful for everyone to have space to heal, but there is still emotional closeness. On the other hand, another staff person described even the possibility of suspension as limiting the capacity of schools to be truly restorative. And a few students and staff spoke about the importance of student willingness to participate; as Sad C. explained, restorative practices can be “used very punitively... like “you have to go to a circle... It’s defeating the whole concept because there’s no self-determination. It’s like another form of punishment.”

Build School Practice

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 process (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 the needs of those involved and mapping 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

As restorative justice seeks to build collective care and healing, it calls for the meaningful engagement and leadership of everyone in the community. But the deeply democratic approach of restorative justice pushes up against the clear hierarchy most of us have experienced in schools, where teachers hold power over students, school administrators hold power over staff, and bureaucrats and policymakers hold distant power over it all. Students’ families are too often left on the outside looking in, and our neighbors are rarely thought of at all. For restorative justice to thrive, we need to radically rethink power dynamics in schools.

Participants described an urgent need for students to have greater self-determination in schools and beyond, including genuine decision-making power and leadership roles. Students pointed to a culture of ageism that made them feel dismissed, as River explained, “We live in a society where we think that someone older is in the right, always... Breaking that sort of stereotype and barrier is definitely one of the first steps in building a movement.” Youth leaders sometimes felt sidelined in restorative justice efforts, as administrators responded to conflict without seeking their input, or teachers disregarded student-crafted circle outlines for advisory discussions. 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.

We also heard about the specific challenge of teachers—even those theoretically on board with restorative justice—having a hard time letting go of their authority when in personal conflicts with students, and emotions are running high. Leon told us, “When it comes down to them feeling disrespected by a student... they feel actually disempowered by restorative justice. There’s teachers who are feeling like the admin is always on the kid’s side, and I find myself like, are we not all on the kid’s side here?”

Participants told us about some of the ways they were starting to disrupt the staff-student hierarchy, with student-staff pairs facilitating restorative responses to student-teacher conflicts, students providing restorative justice training for adults, and staff-only spaces to reflect on and
unpack personal ideas about discipline and punishment.

Leon also reminds us that the work of empowering students is wrapped up in administrators supporting staff, and in the creation of deep cultures of respect for everyone in the school community; when staff feel supported, they have more capacity to support students. We heard about the consequences when that doesn’t happen, with a few staff participants talking about the personally painful, destabilizing experience of school leadership changing, with new principals who did not support the school culture and restorative justice work they had built over years. The fact that a single person can cause such a huge disruption highlights the need for power to be more widely distributed throughout the community, in order to make restorative school cultures more resilient in the face of change.

As Becky put it, we should be “giving communities more say in their schools, rather than having only a few people in charge of all schools.” This means involving students, their families, and school staff, alike in shaping their own lives and their communities. When people feel connected, respected, and empowered, we strengthen our collective capacity to build safety and respond to harm when it occurs.

Coltrane D. (he/him), school staff: “The problem with schools is that they are too hierarchical, and I’m a big advocate for seeing democratic schools... you need to have student voice. But it needs to be a process of involving everyone in the community to really shape their vision of the school. So I don’t think it can be done in one day... [or] in just a conversation with a principal. I think it’s from the ground up really shaping, creating, co-creating a school.”

Anonymous Student (she/her): “Put a recall on the teacher’s training... A lot of the teachers, I feel like they would kind of abuse their power with the students just saying, you know, ‘This is my classroom. These are my rules.’ ... So when it comes to the teacher training, I feel like they should be trained to understand students and actually listen to their students, instead of fighting and barking at their students.”
Build School Practice

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, and building community buy-in—with broad agreement that we need much more of this. We heard many amazing examples of youth leading restorative justice via community-building circles and town halls, response-to-harm processes (circles, mediations), training youth and adults in restorative justice, and more.

Participants also shared many experiences of youth taking initiative to restoratively address personal conflicts with friends and family, and harm in the school community. These moments of organic youth leadership were seen as the best indication that restorative justice was ‘working,’ with a transformational impact for young people and their communities, within and beyond the school walls. Critically, youth-led restorative justice was seen as having ripple effects, building trust and buy-in with other students that was not always possible with adult-led restorative work.

At the same time, staff, students, and parents spoke about the critical role of adult support for youth taking on leadership roles, including providing training and being readily available if students want guidance. A. Geis spoke about wanting to learn from teachers’ experience and collaborate in restorative justice: “work together, share perspectives, share ideas, and then come to a conclusion.” Meaningful youth leadership in restorative justice demands that adults strike a careful balance of providing support and stepping back, guarding against tokenistic or superficial student involvement (see Democratize Schools for more.)

Youth and adult participants also spoke about creating broad cultures of respect for student views and their role in shaping school communities; as Honey put it, “uplift, amplify, and listen to those voices.” This must include young people whose needs have not been met by school, including students who have been impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline.

Honey B. (she/hers), student: “I’ve had some circles with my own teachers, kind of one on one I guess, and that would help a lot because they would really listen to me. I would listen to them and we were really just very cooperative and receptive, what we were saying to each other... The [restorative justice] approach that we did was very, very welcoming but also very, ‘we want everyone to take on this leadership.’ So that outside of this, whether in another school or in a job setting or with your family or your friends, you’ll be able to be mature enough... to be like, ‘okay, we need to sit down and talk about something, because it’s really important.’”
Greater youth input and decision-making throughout school life was seen as enhancing student feelings of safety and agency. For example, we heard about the success of students developing community norms, or co-creating school policies with staff to address emerging issues, like cell phone use in school. Mike W. reflected on the noticeable shift when he and other student leaders took over hosting town halls from the adults, with “the students telling the teachers what they need, which was very different compared to [earlier town halls] when it would just be the teachers talking our ears off.”

Restorative and democratic approaches should also be embedded in academics; as CV put it, “Students should have a bigger voice when it comes to their education.” We heard about several practical approaches for making this happen, with staff, students, and parents emphasizing student-led curricula and project-based learning. Goldie H. reflected on how project-based learning impacted her children: “Not only are they learning, but they feel proud of what they’re learning... they talk about what they have to do and they’re motivated to do it.” Others spoke about peer mentorship for academic issues, student feedback on teacher performance, and freedom for students to focus on social justice issues in their coursework.

Lou T. (she/hers), school staff: “The times that I have felt like the restorative and transformative justice work that I’ve been a part of have felt most successful, it’s almost exclusively been about young people taking leadership and feeling good about facilitating something, about mediating something, about negotiating power in the school... When we let young people lead... when we step back to allow that. It’s not about letting them, but there is a certain amount of stepping back in a school structure that has to happen in order for young people to lead things... the default systems and structures [don’t do that].”
Build School Practice

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 students.

- Train interested students to facilitate restorative circles and provide other forms of support in response-to-harm processes, 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 9th 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.”
When we understand restorative justice as a “way of being” that centers relationships and healing, we see its potential to enrich all parts of our lives. 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. Nori explained the thrilling feeling of having students tell her, “I called the circle at home today, like my parents are stressing me out or my brother. And it’s just like, wow, these skills are... being used outside of our community too, which is eventually the goal, right?” After all, the roots of restorative justice are in Indigenous community and kinship practices that persisted in spite of the U.S. education system, not because of it.

Including students’ families in restorative processes can have cascading effects, strengthening the depth and reach of restorative justice within schools and beyond. Many of the same lessons about Making Rituals & Relationships apply to families, as community-building circles create opportunities to introduce circle practices, build trust between staff and family, strengthen relationships between parents and their children, and give parents an opportunity to engage in storytelling themselves.

We heard about other key ways that school staff build trust with caretakers and involve them in their children’s education, keeping in contact outside of school hours with frequent text communication with student advisors, weekly emails about what’s happening in school, and an intergenerational reading group about race and racism, open to staff, students, and parents.

This relationship building lays the groundwork for harder conversations down the line. Staff described how restorative responses to conflict are strengthened by including family members (with student consent), as they can provide additional support and offer different perspectives on the root causes of harm and paths to healing. Goldie spoke about the powerful experience of watching her child Arcadia M. (she/her), parent: “A year ago or so they had said that all DOE staff, teachers, everybody has to participate in an implicit bias workshop, and they offered it randomly to some parents... I think it would be amazing to have parents also do an implicit bias workshop with their school community, just to get the groundwork: what is restorative justice, what’s an implicit bias, how can parents and teachers come together with administration of the school to support our school community... We as parents need that starting point too, so we’re all communicating with the same language... that’s something that we should learn as a parent in workshops.”
grow before her eyes during a restorative response to a conflict her daughter had with a teacher. And importantly, when students and parents engage in restorative practices together in school settings, they do so in existing familial relationships, building tools for strengthening relationships and handling conflict at home.

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.

With restorative justice specifically, lack of information was seen as a major barrier. Two parents described themselves as deeply engaged in their children’s schools that used restorative justice, but still felt that their schools had not described the steps of restorative justice in detail, limiting their capacity to meaningfully engage. These participants expressed a strong desire for parents to have greater access to training on both anti-racism and the philosophy and practice of restorative justice, growing their capacity to participate in specific instances of conflict, and advocate more broadly for their children to have access to rich, restorative justice and healing-centered school cultures.

**Goldie H. (she/her), parent:** [Speaking about a circle for a conflict with her child and teacher] “It was a great feeling... [the school] demonstrating that it’s okay that you made a mistake, but here we are, let’s talk about the situation... It’s not something to be ashamed of... it was more of a learning process, where I get to see my daughter interact and expressing herself... not only for her education, but more for her self esteem, where... she’s able to say ‘Listen, I’m sorry that I said this to you, it must have been hurtful’ and just own up to something.”

**Louise F. (she/her), school staff:** “Being able to incorporate families also really made it [restorative justice] feel like it was working... That it could extend to the larger community and not just happen within the confines of a school, but that it could reach community and family... having families agree to come in and meet with the team and sit with their kids and unpack really difficult ideas. That they trusted people enough to come and say, yeah, I will do this... and not in a way that it felt like I’ll do this because if I don’t, my child is going to get suspended or something like that... It was just like we want you to come do this and they were like, We want to do it.”
Finally, family engagement is only one starting point for thinking about the many ways that restorative practices are carried outside of school buildings, and into other community spaces. Morgan shared one vision of what this can look like, describing a restorative justice response to address the harm a local business owner experienced as the result of actions by a student—avoiding the young person being arrested and ultimately forming stronger bonds between this business owner and the school community. As Morgan put it, “The idea of restoration didn’t just exist within our four walls. We saw our students as a part of the community that was a living, breathing thing."

Build School Practice

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

Just as restorative justice asks us to transform school culture, it demands that we radically rethink the way money is spent in our schools. Budgets speak plainly about priorities; as Emily R. explained, “The things that are funded, the message underneath is: ‘These are the things that are important, these are the things that are valuable.’ Yet, restorative justice has never been fully resourced in schools. 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.

When we asked students, staff, and parents how to strengthen restorative justice in schools, the answer was straightforward: Hire more people. School staff are stretched thin, and restorative justice is too often an add-on for overburdened staff. One teacher described feeling like he had to teach and do mediations at the same time; young people spoke about “stressed out” counselors with unreasonably large caseloads; and multiple staff pointed to inconsistent (or non-existent) funding for key roles, like restorative justice coordinators. In this context, Leon explained, “I’m sad to say that what makes [restorative justice] work is there being a number of teachers who are really willing to put in a lot of extra work...Who are willing to be after school and be working on preps and lunches and all the rest because... there’s never enough time.” And in the era of COVID burnout, with mounting responsibilities, increased emotional strain, and insufficient support, many educators are already at a breaking point.

This situation is neither sustainable nor just. As Becky G. told us, those in positions of power need to “allow for ample, consistent staffing so there’s always people who want to support the

Emily R. (she/her), school staff: “I would redirect a lot more funding towards [restorative justice], like to pay adults and young people too. A lot of our students had to stop getting involved in after school restorative work because they had jobs that they felt were necessary. And I wish that we could pay them to do the restorative work that they want to do to build our community. That would be incredible. But we don’t have those sorts of resources right now... for better or worse in our society, the things that are funded, the message underneath is, ‘These are the things that are important, these are the things that are valuable.’ So I would like to see more resources go to building up student power in our schools around restorative things.”
students and... who aren’t too busy, and there’s enough. And they’re not changing because their funding got cut and now... you won’t see them again.” Increased hiring is essential in order for school staff to have enough time and emotional resources to engage with young people and their families with the attention and care that they deserve.

What’s more, youth told us that hiring more counselors, social workers, and BIPOC staff was the best way to increase student safety, by increasing the number of trustworthy adults who could listen to them and provide support—an even more urgent need with the mental health stress of the pandemic. Pointing to another way to ‘staff’ restorative justice, educators also spoke about the importance of paying students for leadership roles in restorative justice, recognizing the huge value of their work and the economic reality that many students can’t afford to give up afterschool jobs to participate in unpaid extracurriculars.

Anonymous Student (she/her):
“The officers being present in every single corner of a school building, it kind of just renders more fear in the students... How about... if you want students to feel like they’re most safe and to participate with their best abilities, then having counselors... or anybody that they could speak to about [their] problems. And instead of them being judged, having those people understand their issues and having them supply those resources... It would make them want to come to school and not having to worry about whether a police officer is going to... profile a student... The funding definitely needs to be going toward mental health resources and facilities so they can get more counselors into public schools or any schools, instead of just putting all this money into these public safety departments.”

Staff, students, and parents also spoke about non-staff resources to foster restorative justice work: designated time and physical space in school schedules and buildings, availability of community-wide training on restorative justice and anti-racism, and consistent access to social supports for students, including physical and mental health care, food, clothing, and shelter. 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; we heard about many examples of administrators working creatively and tirelessly to devote time and staff resources to community-building and restorative justice—or, in a few cases, how administrator decisions about resources and priorities undermined the work.

“But how will we pay for it?” This is a critical question for our under-resourced public school system, but one that too often stifles conversation about transformational change. Yet, our focus group discussions make it clear that this question can actually be an opening for rethinking priorities. For instance, several
youth and school staff participants called for taking funding away from metal detectors and NYPD-employed School Safety Agents (SSAs) and repurposing and using that money to fund school staff and supportive resources that fuel restorative justice. In particular, students spoke about redirecting this funding towards guidance counselors, social workers, and rich academic opportunities for all schools. This thinking is in line with ongoing invest/divest advocacy campaigns happening in movements for education justice and the abolition of police and prisons.

Such investments in care were often contrasted with the harm caused by funding school policing. Many staff and some students described the presence of SSAs and metal detectors as directly interfering—or even being fundamentally incompatible—with restorative justice and student safety. This interference was sometimes literal, like when NYPD directives for SSAs contradict a school’s restorative approach, or when students felt targeted by specific SSAs. But participants also spoke about, “the subtle ways that it kind of creeps into many things,” normalizing policing and surveillance, and criminalizing young people in their own schools.

Youth participants had varied and often complex feelings about removing SSAs and metal detectors, however, as some said that these measures made them feel safe (check out Reimagine Safety, Together for more on this). At first glance, this could seem like a zero-sum game, if SSAs make one student feel safe and another student feel unsafe. But this misses the critical point, as youth participants largely agreed about the most important things for feeling safe in school: trusting relationships, open communication, guidance counselors and social workers. And yet, our education system and government have never fully invested in the holistic vision for school safety that students, staff, and parents described.

Participants connected discussions of school funding and safety to broader understandings of economic inequities in education specifically and our economic system more broadly. Multiple young people, staff, and parents

Layla (she/they), student: “Make people less poor. I feel like these things aren’t really isolated... like I can talk about having less police or metal detectors. But... poverty is definitely connected to violence, either way... I’m not comfortable sitting around acting like you know there isn’t violence in like low-income schools. There is. But I think obviously those things [police and metal detectors] don’t help, but... the intention makes sense. But I think the larger problem is poverty. And I think that’s what chancellors and people in power could actually do, is really helping people that are in low-income communities. And making it easier to have...a good enough income and a safe home and all that stuff, ‘cause I think they’re all tied together.”
spoke about frustration over perceived disparities in funding in NYC schools, noting differences between schools with more white and/or wealthy students, and those with more Black and Brown, low-income students—both with respect to funding educational resources and policing infrastructure.

A few youth pointed to complicated interconnections between poverty, safety, and insufficient government support (“these things aren’t isolated”), highlighting a much larger need for economic redistribution and support for low-income communities as the key to enhancing safety in and out of schools. Throughout, we heard calls for more expansive investment in the growth of ALL young people, with youth posing the question: what if we took that money that goes into policing, and put it into our education?

Build School Practice

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.”
Our Policy Demands

Invest in Restorative Justice & Healing-Centered Schools

On Our Terms lays out a vision for what restorative justice and healing-centered schools can and should look like, according to school communities already deeply engaged in this work. Yet, we know that restorative justice has never been fully funded or supported, and there is only so much that members of school communities can do on their own. The changes we need are structural, requiring bold leadership from policymakers and other government officials—and the power of youth, their families, and educators organizing together, demanding nothing short of the transformational change we deserve. We need cross-cutting policy changes in order to ensure all young people in NYC have a chance to learn and grow in restorative, healing-centered schools.

The researchers of this project—students, parents, and educators of New York City—call on the Mayor of New York City to fund and support the Department of Education to carry out the following demands. They have been created through hours of storytelling and research, diving into the challenges and opportunities of what it might take to bring student, parent, and educator-led restorative justice and healing-centered practices into schools. Taking a critical look at staffing, training, and resource allocation, these demands highlight important policy shifts that would pave the way for community-led efforts for safety, accountability, and healing in schools, and moving away from existing systems of policing, control, and surveillance. This is what restorative justice looks like, when it’s On Our Terms.

Hire New Yorkers: Restorative Justice Comes from Our Communities

To build restorative justice practices across a community, it takes a community. For restorative justice to thrive across schools, we must ensure schools have the human resources needed to make the broad culture shift from punitive to healing-centered practice possible. We must better compensate and honor the frequently unpaid or underpaid youth, educators, and support staff already leading this work in schools, and hire more New Yorkers to ensure school communities have all the people power they need.

- Fund positions that develop community and restorative practices in every school, including restorative justice coordinators, social workers, guidance counselors, and other support staff (e.g., community assistant, paraprofessionals) as determined by the school community, ensuring that all students have access to such support staff. These should be permanent positions with long-term funding sources to avoid frequent, disruptive staff turnover.

- Increase recruitment and expand access to employment opportunities for BIPOC applicants across all DOE jobs—from admin to paraprofessionals, educators to social workers, restorative
justice coordinators to community safety workers—with the ultimate goal of smaller class sizes and New York City schools that better reflect the diversity of our students and their communities.

▶ Create community safety worker positions within schools that are not employed by the NYPD and that do not have a policing role, responsible for violence prevention and responses in school communities; such a program might be modeled after community violence interrupters or credible messenger initiatives.

▶ Compensate youth-led restorative justice in schools, via stipends and/or credit-bearing internships.

▶ Develop a Restorative Justice Jobs Pipeline for recent NYC schools alumni, creating a supportive pathway to hire former students as well-paid restorative justice school staff and/or facilitating access to relevant college coursework.

▶ Support and compensate staff in fostering youth leadership and social-emotional skills, via advisory or other classes (not as unpaid, add-on responsibilities).

End Cookie-Cutter Trainings: Restorative Justice Education is a Community Undertaking

Widely-accessible and ongoing education and reflection about restorative justice encourages continuous growth and development within school communities. Moving beyond professional development as usual, we need more holistic, democratic training that builds on the expertise of existing staff, student, and parent practitioners and leaders. Such community education efforts would foster understanding about restorative philosophy and practices, introducing restorative justice as an approach to school culture, rather than just a response to harm. This model of community education would also support those engaged in restorative justice to continually come together to reflect, learning from personal experience and each other, while deepening and honing skills and practices.

▶ Provide and fund restorative justice training for all DOE staff, as well as student and parent leaders in school communities and in citywide positions, including intergenerational training experiences.

▶ Fund and support current student and staff practitioners in schools to lead the city’s restorative justice education efforts, rather than solely relying on outside trainers.

▶ Fund and prioritize youth-led restorative justice training and support for other young people (i.e., Student Success Center Model), and create opportunities for youth input in training for adults, with compensation via stipends or credit-bearing internships.

▶ Make restorative justice circle keeper training accessible to all DOE staff, as well as student and parent leaders in school communities or citywide positions.
Ensure that restorative justice training offers a holistic, intersectional approach for school culture, not just as an “alternative to suspension.” Specifically, it should: emphasize the role of community building and prevention; integrate an anti-oppression and anti-racist lens about the origins of restorative justice and its use in schools; and interrogate power dynamics within schools that may pose barriers to building restorative school cultures (e.g., adult - student hierarchy).

Mandate anti-racism training for all DOE staff, and make it widely accessible to students and parents. Restorative justice staff and administrators should receive additional, intensive training about using restorative justice to address racist or other identity-based harm in schools.

Ensure that citywide restorative justice training efforts build upon and integrate other staff training on anti-oppression frameworks, trauma-informed pedagogy, and culturally-sustaining curriculum—all of which enhance the capacity of staff and schools to understand and address student needs, and respond to interpersonal and institutional harm in schools.

Invest in Safe Schools: Healing Takes Time and Resources

Restorative justice has never been fully funded in New York City. The educators, parents, and young people who have been building restorative school cultures have done so without adequate investment from state and city government, relying upon discrete funding opportunities, overstretched staff, and extensive unpaid labor of staff, students, and other community members. Meanwhile, upwards of $425 million per year is directed to fund school policing and security infrastructure like metal detectors and NYPD-employed School Safety Agents, contributing to a culture of policing and surveillance of students that interferes with efforts to build restorative schools. We need a funding model that embodies the cultural transformation we are seeking in our schools. This means divesting from punishment and policing, and investing in prevention via social supports and community building, prevention, as well as restorative, healing-centered responses to harm.

Divest from the Department of Education’s $425M contract with the NYPD for school policing staffing (e.g., NYPD-employed ‘School Safety Agents’) as adopted for Fiscal Year 2022, as well as nontransparent funding directed to NYPD youth policing strategies (e.g., Youth Coordination Officers, among other initiatives), estimated to be upwards of tens of millions of dollars; reallocate these funds towards the hiring and other resource needs described here.

Allocate specific time and funding to support community-building and healing practices and programs in schools (e.g., expand advisory to all schools, discretionary funding for community events, adult- and peer-led mentorship programs, and discretionary funds to provide key support after incidents of harm).
 Allocate specific time and funding to support restorative justice as a community-building practice and preventative practice, not only as a response to harm. In addition to the increased staffing described above, key schedule and funding priorities include:

- the expansion of advisory to all schools
- system-wide, non-academic community building days
- adult- and peer-led mentorship initiatives
- discretionary budgets for school community-building events
- adoption of culturally-sustaining curricula, with student input

Provide discretionary funding to schools to support next steps resulting from restorative responses to harm, including accessing social and emotional support for those who have been harmed and those who have caused harm.

Create citywide resource guides of neighborhood-based support services for youth and families that are not attached to systems of policing, surveillance, or family separation, to be used in support of response to harm circles.

**Rethinking Restorative Justice Policy: Towards a Relationship-Centered Process**

Restorative justice cannot only be enacted through top-down policy mandates alone; for authentic and meaningful change, it needs to be integrated into the practices that build and implement those policies as well. The Department of Education and city government must adopt restorative practices into how they develop policies. Decision making power across our education system needs to be reassessed and reimagined in order for restorative justice to be incorporated in a way that is authentic and prevents recreating past harm. It is critical that school community members—students, their families, educators and school staff—are key decision makers in the systems and institutions that shape their lives.

Ensure that Department of Education restorative justice policies actively acknowledge in writing and engage with in practice:

- community building as the foundation of responding to harm;
- the indigenous roots of restorative justice; and,
- the existence of structural and institutional harm, including within schools.

Ensure that administrators, staff, and students have citywide opportunities to co-develop and reflect on the growth of restorative and healing-centered practices, including sharing innovative approaches across school communities.

Create citywide youth leadership positions to inform restorative justice and other school policies, with decision making power and/or voting rights.

Provide and fund introductory workshops about restorative justice available to all NYC parents via borough-wide or citywide workshops at least twice a year, promoted through
children’s schools and community networks.

▶ Provide funding and guidance to schools for processes to design community-specific approaches to school safety, rather than controlling it through citywide mandates.

▶ Expand participatory budgeting, so that schools and communities more broadly can seek funding for initiatives important to their communities (including community-building events and other restorative justice related initiatives).

▶ Establish data systems for tracking responses to harm and other school issues that better reflect restorative processes and a non-punititive approach.

▶ Fund and provide schools with guidance about how to design community-specific approaches to school safety, rather than controlling it through citywide mandates.
References


Advancement Project (2010). Test, punish, and push out: How “zero-tolerance” and high-stakes testing funnel youth into the school-to-prison pipeline. Los Angeles, CA: Advancement Project;


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Appendix A. On Our Terms Community Conversations Toolkit

Facilitation Guide & Circle Outlines for Continuing the Conversation in Community

Throughout the course of the On Our Terms participatory action research project, we had ten central themes emerge through which we can more deeply look into what building a restorative school community looks like. This toolkit provides guides for having community building circles about each of the ten themes from On Our Terms, so you can keep the conversation going in your schools, families, and communities. We hope that you’ll use these as a starting point, but adapt them and make them your own!

What is this?

Each of these themes comes with recommendations for in-school implementation and policy shifts. But restorative justice practice teaches us that alongside any efforts to change institutions, we must also put effort into healing and deepening community relationships, and into building dialogue and shared understandings about the ideas raised by this project. While you may already be talking about some of these topics in your school, others might be new to your community. We created these circle outlines with the hope that they can help grow our movement; we offer them as a starting point and a guide for bringing more people into the conversation of what restorative culture can look like and how we can make it happen.

Who is this for?

These circles are intended as an intra-community tool for strengthening relationships and talking about the impacts of the themes and tensions within school-based restorative justice. Designed to be facilitated in the time it may take to teach a class in New York City schools, these circle outlines can be used with students, teachers, administrators, parents and families, and our communities at-large. For each theme, we have two sets of questions: one geared towards peer-to-peer discussions among young people, and one geared towards intergenerational discussions in and beyond the classroom (e.g., between students and school staff, young people and their families, or in organizing and other community spaces).

In both the peer-to-peer and intergenerational variations, there are three types of questions for every theme:
▶ **EXPLORE:** These are questions to build communal definitions and understandings around the topics at hand

▶ **SHARE EXPERIENCES:** These are questions to reflect on life experiences related to those topics and to share stories of impact or change

▶ **ENVISION:** These are questions that challenge us to use our understandings and experiences to think about action and the future

The purpose of these questions is to provide options for beginning these conversations, and we hope that you'll adapt them so they are most relevant and useful for you and your community. Especially in the context of a bell schedule, it is totally okay to just focus on one of these key questions! Our hope is that the dialogues these questions start around these questions aren't one-offs, but ongoing.

We also encourage you to use circle outlines and question sets that best meet your community's needs *right now*—and don't feel pressure to speed through all of these topics. For some, that might mean starting with the circle for Center Community & Healing, only with school staff; for others, that might mean intergenerational conversations about how we define safety with students, their families, and school staff. Not all of these questions are easy, and many require a sense of trust and vulnerability in order to engage with them. Take your time to build the relationships that will make these sorts of conversations possible.

**How do I use it?**

We hope that these conversations can take place through the framework of restorative justice circles, and recommend that they are held by people with experiences in keeping those circles (for more guidance on this, please check out our resources page!). For those unfamiliar with these community building processes, restorative justice circles build community through embodying restorative principles; they ask community members to come and share space to storytell, reflect, and dream together.

Each of these circles typically include a **TALKING PIECE**, or a token that can be passed around the circle to uplift and acknowledge each voice in the space and to amplify the roles of both speaker and listener, and a **CENTERING PIECE**, or a tangible symbol of why people have gathered that can be used to ground, and recenter throughout a conversation. These pieces can often be determined by the facilitator or circle keeper.

In each of the following circle outlines, you'll also find the following components:

▶ **GROUND AND CONNECT:** This is a way to settle into the space together through relationship building and a chance to both see and acknowledge one another in the space. These responses can be shared out in pairs, in a circle round verbally, or by writing them down and placing them visibly or in the circle center.
► COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS: This is a way to build norms around how we want to treat one another in the space, specifically through thinking about what behaviors we can embody to build towards a more restorative world. If you already belong to a space that has made community agreements or guidelines together, feel free to use and return to those.

► CRITICAL QUESTIONS: These questions are to guide a conversation around each theme, through exploring what it is all about, what it might mean to people in the space, and how we can envision a future that embodies it. We encourage you to use the questions you feel can really cultivate dialogue among your community.

► CLOSING: This is a way to close out the space together, on a note of possibility and action. These responses can be shared through one word responses, silent reflections, or moments to write and journal.
1. Center Community & Healing: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on [onourterms.nyc](http://onourterms.nyc) if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

**GROUND AND CONNECT**

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “...most people, when they show up to a place where they feel welcome, they show up more as themselves, even if they're not sure who that is yet. And I'm not just talking about kids, I'm talking about staff too.... it's all these different root connections happening at once, in all these different directions, and the hierarchy starts to peel away. Definitely power dynamics still exist, but we're able to act more as members of the community, instead of just roles in the community.”

2. If you could glow a color at all times, which color would you glow and why?

**COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS**

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).

   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; if you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

**CRITICAL QUESTIONS**

**Peer-to-peer circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** What messaging have you received about who needs to heal, or how that healing might happen?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you share a time when you had a sense of belonging with others? How did it feel for you?
3. **ENVISION.** Describe your dream community. What does it look like and feel like? What are friendships and relationships like there?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** What does healing mean to you?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you think of a time when you felt yourself experiencing healing? Who was with you, and what role did they play? What did you need during that time?

3. **ENVISION.** What would your community look like if it was equipped with what people needed to heal?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around centering community and healing in schools:
   
a. 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.

   b. 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.

   c. 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.

2. After hearing these ideas, close out by writing down a place you would like to focus on making stronger relationships within. If there is a physical map of the community available, you can have people check out by marking where their space is on the map, and if not, simply sharing out.
2. Transform Culture: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “Leadership actually needs to be involved. But the members of the school community have to be stakeholders in the restorative justice process... Parents, students, caretakers, maybe even community members... someone who works at a restaurant in the area or someone who interacts with our young people on a daily basis. Because it all comes back to relationships with our young people. And so the big ideas sometimes come from leadership, but it takes a community of folks who are like, ‘We are going to live and breathe and be restorative and transformative justice.’ That’s what I see in my context really, really pushing the work and moving us past those big ideas and actually doing it.”

2. If you could be any container, what container would you be and why?

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).

   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. EXPLORE. What do you understand about punishment in society? Who do you see carrying out punishment?
2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you think of a time that you were in conflict with somebody you cared about or loved? How did you treat them, or how were you treated?

3. **ENVISION.** If we all knew the experiences one another has been through, how do you think the way we respond to one another in moments of harm or hurt change?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** When you think about your own culture, what comes to mind? What do those things mean to you?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you remember a time where a community member supported you in a way that felt important or unique? What was that like?

3. **ENVISION.** What are the steps we need to take in order to better care for one another across the community? What parts of your culture are already contributing to that?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around transforming culture in schools:
   a. 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.
   b. Ensure 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.
   c. Leadership must build in time and settings to unpack ideas about discipline, learn about the school-to-prison pipeline, and 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.

2. After hearing these, close out with asking people to fill in the blanks of the sentence, “My first day of school, I used to be __________, but now I am __________,” either in writing or out loud. If we have all experienced transformation and change in who we are within our schools, then surely we have the power to create that change as well.
3. Prioritize Racial Justice: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “When we had to talk about race and the problems, it was really awkward because I feel like a lot of people didn’t want to offend somebody when we talk about privilege... and that’s what made it really hard to get the truth out... Talking with other students about (racism)... they thought that all that stuff was like history, they didn’t know that that stuff was still happening today... That’s a privilege that you’re not aware of the things that are happening”

2. Who is a leader from the past that inspires you? Have participants write down their responses and offer them to the circle as the Centering Piece.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. EXPLORE. What are the ways you see race coming up in education, whether in schools at-large or in classrooms?

2. SHARE EXPERIENCES. Can you share a time where you remember seeing yourself represented, or not, in the classroom? What did you learn from those moments?
3. **ENVISION.** What does an anti-racist educator look like? How might they teach, and how might they respond to or care for students?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** Why is it important to you to know your own history? How does it change your day-to-day life?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** How has race impacted the way you experience community, or how you build relationships with others?

3. **ENVISION.** What would a society look like where everybody has an awareness of their own people’s or culture’s history? How would things change?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around prioritizing racial justice in schools:
   
   a. Implement culturally-sustaining curricula, with young people involved in the planning and teaching of lessons that reflect them and their experiences.
   
   b. 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.
   
   c. 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.

2. After hearing one another’s responses, and these ideas for change in the community, what is a question or curiosity you are leaving with? Write it down on a piece of paper, and come back to it over the coming days, and see what you find.
4. Make Rituals & Relationships: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “Before students went to their classes [every morning], we spent 15 minutes just doing community building, led by students... with the support of their advisors. There was a lot of student empowerment, but also a space of joy and celebration. It became a community ritual... This was such an important part of our restorative community because it helps students think of even circles... not as something where you go when you’ve done something wrong, but as something that you also come together to... just build community... But also a place where, when there was community wide harm... we could address it.”

2. Draw a small map of a place that is important to you, no smaller than a room and no bigger than a neighborhood. Choose three words to describe moments that have happened there.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).

   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. EXPLORE. What are the things you feel you need to do on a daily basis? Why are they important parts of your schedule or routine?
2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Is there somebody in your life you would want to communicate with more regularly? What is your relationship like with that person, or what would more time to communicate with them allow you to do?

3. **ENVISION.** If you were tasked with leading a weekly space for community members to come together and reflect, what ideas or topics would you want to talk about?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** What do you think of when you hear the word “ritual”? What rituals have you seen in your community?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you tell us about an experience you have had that could have benefitted from more time to build relationships or understandings?

3. **ENVISION.** Who in your community could benefit from time to regularly connect and communicate? Where and when could that take place?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around making rituals and relationships in school:
   
   a. 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.
   
   b. Use advisory as a consistent space to center student needs and voices in the classroom, integrating student co-facilitation of community-building circles.
   
   c. 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.

2. After hearing one another’s responses and these ideas for change in the community, who is somebody you want to continue this conversation with this week?
5. Reimagine Safety, Together: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “The connection between emotional and physical safety… A lot of physical altercations… stem from people not feeling emotionally safe. If you create a space where people feel emotionally safe, like the other types of safety are kind of already built in there…. I feel safe when I feel like people see me for my whole self… No one’s going to come at me if I make a mistake or do something wrong, that they’ll nurture me and help guide me through that. But I won’t be chastised or excommunicated if I’m not doing everything right.”

2. What’s an object in your life that makes you feel safe? With a partner, share the story of how you came to have it.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).

   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. EXPLORE. Who do you see currently defining safety in your community? What might their definition of safety be?
2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** What are the spaces in your life where you define your own rules and responsibilities? What does it feel like to be there?

3. **ENVISION.** In listening to what makes other people feel safe, how would you define what safety is? What does it feel like or look like?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** Where are the places, or who are the people that you feel the safest with? What about them helps you to feel safe?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you think of a moment where somebody responded to a situation in a way that was different than how you would have responded? What did it make you feel or think about?

3. **ENVISION.** What can a community look like where everybody has a role to keep one another safe? How would that change your day-to-day life?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around reimagining safety, together:
   
a. 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.
   
b. 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.
   
c. 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.

2. After hearing these ideas for change, what’s a place in your community that you think could benefit from a conversation about safety? Who do you think is best suited to lead that conversation? Is it you?
6. Respond to Harm as a Community: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “I’m thinking about normalizing conflict. The idea that restorative practice is absent of problems in a building is not true, we’re humans and conflict does exist. So, thinking differently about what type of conflict is it. Is it physical conflict? Is it emotional conflict? Like just normalizing that it will happen and how are we deciding to deal with it so that everybody feels safe? With the understanding that you WILL be in conflict with others... and work from that understanding that conflict won’t be erased, but that there are healthier ways of handling it.”

2. If you had to get rid of one flavor of ice cream, which would you get rid of?

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. **EXPLORE.** Why do you think conflict might be an important part of any community? What can we potentially learn from it?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** In your life, what is something that you have learned through making mistakes? How have those things impacted you?
3. **ENVISION.** If you were to make another mistake, how would you want the people around you, or even yourself, to respond? How would you want to be treated at that moment?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** What skills or resources exist in your community to understand or respond to conflict? What do they do?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you remember a time when your community responded to conflict in ways that resulted in positive change or learning? What happened?

3. **ENVISION.** What do you think your community could do to change the way they respond to moments where others create harm or make mistakes? Is there something you want to keep in mind in the future when it might happen?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around holding harm as a community:
   a. 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.
   b. 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).
   c. 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.

2. As you listen to these recommendations, write down a way that you can better show up for your community in times of conflict. If time permits, share them out loud and create a list that can continue to grow in the community.
7. Democratize Schools: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “The problem with schools is that they are too hierarchical, and I’m a big advocate for seeing democratic schools... you need to have student voice. But it needs to be a process of involving everyone in the community to really shape their vision of the school. So I don't think it can be done in one day... [or] in just a conversation with a principal. I think it's from the ground up really shaping, creating, co-creating a school.”

2. Take a moment to ground in your body by taking three deep breaths. With your eyes closed and without lifting your pen or pencil, draw a self-portrait.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. Explore. When making a decision, what things do you typically think about? What is important to you in making choices?

2. Share Experiences. Can you think of a time where you were included in a decision making process by somebody else? What was that like for you?
3. Envision. If you had the responsibility to make choices for your school community, what kind of changes would you want to make? Who would you want to make those changes with?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. Explore. Can you think of a community where one person makes a decision? Where a group of people make decisions together? What similarities or differences do you see in those spaces?

2. Share Experiences. Can you think of a time where a decision was made that impacted you, but you weren’t a part of the decision making process? What was that like?

3. Envision. What could happen to a community that makes decisions together? What possibilities might come?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around democratizing schools:
   a. Create opportunities for staff and students to jointly plan and facilitate Intergenerational circle 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.
   b. 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.
   c. 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, and restorative justice action team meetings.

2. As you think about these recommendations, if you were to lead a conversation in your school, what topics of concerns would you bring up? Let’s take a couple minutes to brainstorm as many as we can, in closing.
8. Let Youth Lead: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “Our school definitely promoted students acknowledging and using their own voices to implement change rather than having somebody speak for us... Our school is guiding us to make our own decisions and healthy decisions that we can use after we leave high school.”

2. What is something you really liked as a child? What is one thing you really like now?

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. **EXPLORE.** What does it mean to you to be a leader? Where do you see leaders in your community?

2. **SHARING EXPERIENCES.** Can you think of a time when a decision was made in school that would have been different, had you been a part of the decision making process?

3. **ENVISION.** How do you think a student’s experience in school would change if they had a role in making decisions for their school community? What would change?
Intergenerational circle

1. **EXPLORE.** Why is your voice important? What do you want to bring or give to the people around you?

2. **SHARING EXPERIENCES.** Can you tell us about a time that you felt like a leader. What were you doing? Who were you leading with?

3. **ENVISION.** Imagine if there were youth in every decision making space in a community… What do you think would change in your community?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around letting youth lead in schools:
   a. Integrate peer mentorship within the school culture generally and restorative justice specifically, with young people sharing skills, knowledge, and support with other young people.
   b. 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 students.
   c. 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.

2. Thinking about the thing you liked as a child and the thing you like now, what do you think is the relationship between those things? What might that say about who you are today as a leader?
9. Build with Families & Neighbors: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “Being able to incorporate families also really made it [RJ] feel like it was working... That it could extend to the larger community and not just happen within the confines of a school, but that it could reach community and family... having families agree to come in and meet with the team and sit with their kids and unpack really difficult ideas. That they trusted people enough to come and say, yeah, I will do this... and not in a way that it felt like I'll do this because if I don't, my child is going to get suspended or something like that... It was just like we want you to come do this and they were like, We want to do it.”

2. If you were an item in the kitchen, what would you be an why?

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. EXPLORE. What have you learned from your family or community about what it means to have each others’ backs or to support one another?
2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Think about some of the places you go on a daily basis—Who are the people in those spaces who you look to for wisdom or advice? What have you learned from those people?

3. **ENVISION.** In what instances do you think would be helpful to include parents, families, and community members in what happens at school? Why?

**Intergenerational circle**

1. **EXPLORE.** Can you think of places in your community where people interact across generations? What kind of experiences happen there?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you remember a time where parents or families worked together to make something happen for the community? What did you learn from that?

3. **ENVISION.** In a time of need, who would you want to call on for help or care in your community? How do you think having that support system might impact yourself or others?

**CLOSING**

1. Read the following recommendations around school communities building with families and neighbors:

   a. 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, 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.

   b. 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.

   c. 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.

2. After hearing one another’s responses, what’s a conversation you want to have with your family or neighborhood that you haven’t been able to before?
10. Invest in Care, Divest from Harm: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
   “I would redirect a lot more funding towards that [restorative justice], like to pay adults and young people too. A lot of our students had to stop getting involved in after school restorative work because they had jobs that they felt were necessary. And I wish that we could pay them to do the restorative work that they want to do to build our community. That would be incredible. But we don’t have those sorts of resources right now. For better or worse in our society, the things that are funded, the message underneath is, ‘These are the things that are important, these are the things that are valuable.’ So I would like to see more resources go to building up student power in our schools around restorative things.”

2. If there was a book written about how you feel when you wake up in the morning, what would it be called?

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).

   a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
   b. Active listening
   c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
   d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
   e. Passing is always an option
CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. **EXPLORE.** What are things you see in schools and communities that impact a sense of trust? What are the things you see that build it?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** What practices in your community have prevented you from showing up as yourself?

3. **ENVISION.** If you were to create new jobs in your community to keep one another safe, what would those be? Who would you want to be in those roles?

Intergenerational circle

1. **EXPLORE.** What are the mental health resources that currently exist in your community? Who has access to those? How?

2. **SHARE EXPERIENCES.** Can you think back to your first time in your school building or school community? What were the things that surprised you, and how did you feel about them?

3. **ENVISION.** If you had to decide what resources went into your community, what would you make or create that does not exist now? How would it change life for people?

CLOSING

1. Read the following recommendations around investing in care and divesting from harm in school:
   a. Fund positions that develop community and restorative practices in every school, including restorative justice coordinators, social workers, guidance counselors, and other support staff (e.g., community assistant, paraprofessionals), ensuring that all students have access to mental health professionals and other supportive adults. These should be permanent positions with long-term funding sources to avoid frequent, disruptive staff turnover.
   b. Create community safety worker positions within schools, not employed by the NYPD and that do not have a policing role, who are responsible for violence prevention and responses in school communities; such a program might be modeled after community violence interrupters or credible messenger initiatives.
   c. Divest from the Department of Education’s $425M contract with NYPD for metal detectors and NYPD-employed School Safety Agents in schools, and reallocate those funds towards the hiring needs described above.

2. What does it mean to you to “Invest in Care and Divest from Harm”? Fill in the following sentence with new words: “We need to invest in _________ and divest from ________.”
“Making vent diagrams as a practice helps us recognize and reckon with contradictions and keep imagining and acting from the intersections and overlaps. Venting is an emotional release, an outlet for our anger, frustration, despair — and as a vent enables stale, suffocating air to flow out, it allows new fresh air to cycle in and through.”

—E.M. & Rachel, co-creators of Vent Diagrams

From the beginning, On Our Terms has been deeply inspired by Vent Diagrams, an arts project created by artist-activist Rachel Schragis and educator-activist E.M. Eisen-Markowitz (and long-time On Our Terms community member!). Showing the overlap of two ideas that appear to both be true and contradictory, Vent Diagrams have helped the On Our Terms community think through and dig into the difficult, contradictory, tension filled moments of trying to build restorative justice in schools—which can simultaneously be sites of institutional and interpersonal harm, and sites of growth, connection, and imagination.

Like Vent Diagrams, we believe that restorative culture allows for both an emotional outlet and a breath of fresh air, and they have allowed us to dream bigger by “moving from the overlap” and to work through the tensions we face in this work. We invite you to create your own Vent Diagrams—solo or with others—and to think about what seeming-contradictions show up in your school communities, and what possibilities emerge when we embrace the contradictions. (To learn more about Vent Diagrams, check out the project’s website.)
Appendix C. 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.
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.”