



THE GOOD SCHOOLS SEMINARS

## CREATING SAFE & SUPPORTIVE SCHOOLS II: NEXT STEPS

AN ALBERT SHANKER INSTITUTE SEMINAR SERIES  
November 4-5, 2015

### SESSION V: IDEA SHARING

#### ***How One District Improved 'Conditions for Learning'***

Nirvi Shah, *Education Week* (February 11, 2013)

Describes how and why Cleveland schools took concerted steps to improve schools' climate and the conditions of teaching and learning.

#### ***Urban Districts Embrace Social-Emotional Learning***

Evie Blad, *Education Week* (June 10, 2015)

Cleveland is one of eight large, predominantly urban districts that have committed to a multiyear initiative that allows researchers to study their systemwide social-emotional learning programs. Such programs blend evidence-based classroom curriculum with school climate improvements and efforts to infuse social and emotional concepts into the teaching of traditional subjects such as history.

#### ***New School Climate Tool Facilitates Early Intervention On Social-Emotional Issues: Bullying And Suicide Prevention***

Alvin Larson, *Shanker Blog* (July 2, 2015)

Meriden schools have developed a statistically valid school climate survey that allows staff to identify students who perceive themselves to be in social-emotional crisis and/or whose answers suggest they had inadequate coping skills—in other words, a tool that produces timely, actionable information that school psychologists can use to help individual students in need.

#### ***AISD Talks Prison Pipeline; Reviews Current System***

Courtney Griffin, *Austin Monitor* (October 7, 2015)

A recent article describing the Austin Independent School District's efforts to implement social-emotional learning programs and break the "school to prison pipeline."

#### ***The Schools St. Paul's Students and Families Deserve***

St. Paul Federation of Teachers

This pamphlet describes the unions vision for a whole-child, community inclusive approach to school improvement.

***Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson from St. Paul***

Mary Cathryn Ricker, *Dissent* (Summer 2015)

How the union gained collaboration and support on key issues by reaching out to families and the community and involving them in the labor-management negotiation process. One result was a contract that, among other features, established School Climate Improvement Teams composed of educators and parents designed to make students of all ethnic and racial backgrounds feel welcome and suspensions and expulsions.

Education Week's blogs > Rules for Engagement

## How One District Improved 'Conditions for Learning'

By [Nirvi Shah](#) on February 11, 2013 10:18 AM | [1 Comment](#)

After a Cleveland, Ohio, teenager walked into a district high school more than five years ago and **opened fire on the school**, hitting two students and two adults before killing himself, the district responded by spending more than \$6 million on metal detectors and new school security officers.

But after about another year passed by, the 41,000-student school district took a very different approach to improving safety and behavior at its schools.

By adding a strong social-emotional learning program at all elementary schools, student support teams that intervene based on **early warning signs**, and replacing out-of-school suspension with discipline methods that keep students in school, **the Cleveland, Ohio, school district** made dramatic improvements in the conditions for student learning over the last few years, new research finds.

Those "conditions for learning" include improvements to students' feelings of safety and support, says **the analysis**, from the American Institutes for Research.

In practical terms, that meant Cleveland schools—where 100 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches at school—from 2008 to 2012:

- cut out-of-school suspensions over three years by 60 percent;
- improved student attendance districtwide;
- cut referrals for fighting and violence among students by 20 percentage points; and
- improved student behavior in other categories, too, including disruptive behavior and harassment.

To get these results, the district made some comprehensive, far-reaching changes. (Note that the title of the analysis of Cleveland's work is "Avoid Simple Solutions and Quick Fixes....")

Perhaps its worthy of note that Asa Coon, the student who opened fire on his school back in 2007, had been bullied at school and was failing at least one class—and one of his targets was that world history teacher. Even before Coon's shooting spree, parents had asked for more security measures at the school. And Coon **had been suspended from school** for several days before the shooting.

The district put into place a social and emotional learning program in all elementary schools called **Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies**, or PATHS, which helps students understand, regulate, and express emotions. Student support teams were established to intervene when students exhibited early warning signs, including poor attendance and misbehavior. And the district replaced in-school suspension with so-called planning centers, where students worked on their academic work and their self-discipline skills.

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## EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: June 9, 2015

Published in Print: June 10, 2015, as **Cleveland Embraces Social-Emotional Learning**

# Urban Districts Embrace Social-Emotional Learning

By **Evie Blad**

*Cleveland*

In a kindergarten classroom at Wade Park Elementary School this spring, students huddled around their teacher in a tight circle while she held up cards that said "proud" and "ashamed" and explained to them what it's like to feel those emotions.

"I felt proud when I graduated from college," she said.

The children had started the day by writing one-word descriptions of their emotions on the classroom's whiteboard, completing the prompt, "Today I feel," with words like "happy," "love," and "tired" in shaky penmanship.

The simple morning classroom exercises are a small part of a data-driven, districtwide social-emotional learning plan in Cleveland that aims to boost students' ability to make responsible decisions, regulate their own emotions and behavior, and build healthy relationships with their peers.

As a growing body of research links such competencies to higher academic achievement, school systems such as the 40,000-student Cleveland district have started to take notice.

It is one of eight large, predominantly urban districts that have committed to a multiyear initiative that is allowing researchers to study their **systemwide social-emotional learning programs**. Such programs blend evidence-based classroom curriculum with school climate improvements and efforts to infuse social and emotional concepts into the teaching of traditional subjects like history.

In Cleveland, for example, posters illustrated with colorful stoplights hang on the walls of elementary classrooms, advising students how to talk through problems.

Social-emotional lessons are taught in a district-prescribed sequence, similar to traditional learning objectives. Elementary teachers use a curriculum called Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, or PATHS. High schools have adopted varied approaches, including using history and writing assignments to help students share what they value and care about.

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Each school has designated teams of staff members to lead social-emotional-learning efforts, work with families, and coordinate student supports.

Throughout the district, rooms previously used for in-school suspensions have been converted into "planning centers," where teachers refer misbehaving students to talk through problematic or disruptive actions as an alternative to traditional discipline.

### **Data Driven**

Every district brings a unique approach to the multidistrict initiative, which is led by the Chicago-based Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. What sets Cleveland apart is its use of data.

Teachers and principals at the district's 96 schools rely on students' responses on "conditions for learning" surveys, administered online three times a year to grades 3-12, to guide their work. The surveys are akin to formative assessments, but instead of gauging student progress in math and reading, responses help educators size up whether students feel safe, supported, and challenged, and how students think their peers stack up socially and emotionally.

"We are constantly looking at the data," Wade Park Principal Janet McDowell told leaders from other CASEL districts who came to observe her classrooms in the spring. "I meet with the teachers weekly."

Cleveland school leaders developed their social-emotional-learning strategy after a 2007 school shooting. In that incident, a 14-year-old gunman shot two students and two teachers at one of the district's alternative high schools before killing himself.

Afterward, the district built up its safety hardware, installing more equipment like metal detectors to make buildings safer, said Eric Gordon, the district's chief executive officer. But leaders also recognized a need to build emotional safety and supports for students, a strategy they refer to as "humanware."

The district began using the conditions for learning survey in 2008 after it worked with the Washington based research and evaluation organization American Institutes for Research to identify its strengths and weaknesses in supporting students.

The AIR initially proposed using the survey—which was first developed for the Chicago school district—just once to gauge students' perceptions, said David Osher, an AIR vice president and the co-director of its health and social-development program. But leaders instead opted to administer the survey repeatedly to track the district's work. Some other districts take annual surveys on issues such as school climate, but few are as extensive or administered as regularly as they are in Cleveland.

The plan has buy-in from the district's teachers' union, which agreed to include the survey results in its differentiated-pay plan. If a school shows agreed-upon amounts of growth in several areas of the survey's results, every union member in the building gets a small stipend.

"I imagine over time, people will be doing this more," the AIR's Mr. Osher said of Cleveland's data-driven approach. The U.S. Department of Education will soon release a free survey that districts can use to measure factors like student safety, support, and comfort at school, he said.

### **'A Safe Haven'**

Teachers and principals said that building supportive school environments and nurturing so-called

"soft skills" can be challenging in high-poverty districts like Cleveland, where all students receive free and reduced-price lunches.

Situations outside of school—often related to poverty, crime, or community conflicts—can make it difficult for students to focus in the classroom, teachers said.

The city's police department has been **singled out by the U.S. Department of Justice** for using overly aggressive tactics, leading to a sense of distrust in low-income and predominantly African-American communities. Last November, a Cleveland police officer shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who had been a student in the district. That shooting, along with events in Baltimore and Ferguson, Mo., have sparked national conversations about race and the limits of police power.

In advisory sessions with teachers held as part of the district's social-emotional-learning program, high school students, many of whom know the Rice family, talked about their own experiences with police and the family problems they carry with them into the classroom, principals said.

As the district prepared for a potentially controversial verdict in another police-shooting case in May, administrators worked with teachers to hold classroom conversations to discuss students' feelings about the case, as well as larger race and justice issues.

"In an urban district, we cannot control what happens outside of school," Christopher Broughton, the district's director of research and evaluation, told school district leaders from across the country who observed Cleveland's programs in May. "But, if inside school, students feel this is a safe haven, this is a place where they can grow and be challenged, we've done our job."

Cleveland's leaders describe the development of the district's social-emotional learning strategies as an ongoing process. They've learned a few things along the way.

For example, high school students score their schools much lower on conditions for learning surveys than their younger peers. That may be because they have higher expectations or because such strategies are harder to implement in secondary schools, high school principals said.

But Mr. Osher believes data collected between 2008 and 2013 indicate the strategy is proving its merit. Those data show a strong correlation between growth in students' responses on the conditions for learning survey and performance on state-administered tests, he said.

## Measuring Results

AIR researchers are also working to analyze the work of the other districts participating in CASEL's initiative: Anchorage, Alaska; Austin, Texas; Chicago; Nashville, Tenn.; Oakland, Calif.; Sacramento, Calif.; and Washoe County, Nev.

As part of the initiative, those districts will each receive a total of \$1.6 million from the NoVo Foundation over six years to plan and help implement their social-emotional-learning strategies, said Melissa Schlinger, CASEL's vice president of programs and practice. (Funding from the NoVo Foundation helps support *Education Week's* coverage of social-emotional learning.)

The initiative's immediate goal was to determine if it's possible to implement social-emotional learning districtwide in a large school system, Ms. Schlinger said. Preliminary research shows that it is. Using staff and student surveys, interviews, and observations, **researchers found**

**high levels of fidelity in program implementation in participating districts**, despite such challenges as changes in superintendents since the initiative began.

They also found drops in discipline rates, improved attendance, and, in many cases, improved academic performance in schools with higher levels of implementation.

The broader discussion about social-emotional and noncognitive skills has accelerated among both policymakers and educators since the initiative launched in 2011, Ms. Schlinger noted.

That new focus has led to state laws focusing on "whole child" issues, improved school climate, and social-emotional-learning programs. On the federal level, bills have been introduced in both houses of Congress that would allow federal professional-development funds for teachers to be spent on training for social-emotional-learning programs.

In Cleveland, Mr. Gordon, the CEO, said he's made it a habit to call newly appointed superintendents in districts with social-emotional learning programs to say "you have important work that you need to know about on day one of your new job."

And leaders of the CASEL districts hope others can learn from their successes and struggles if they decide to adopt similar approaches.

"I don't know that there's any one right starting point from our experience," Mr. Gordon said. "It is about an intentionality, and it's about just starting."

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## New School Climate Tool Facilitates Early Intervention On Social-Emotional Issues: Bullying And Suicide Prevention

by Alvin Larson -- July 2, 2015

*Our guest author today is Dr. Alvin Larson, director of research and evaluation at Meriden Public Schools, a district that serves about 8,900 students in Meriden, CT. Dr. Larson holds a B.A. in Sociology, M. Ed., M.S. in Educational Research and a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. The intervention described below was made possible with support from Meriden's community, leadership and education professionals.*

For the most part, students' social-emotional concerns start small; if left untreated, though, they can become severe and difficult to manage. Inappropriate behaviors are not only harmful to the student who exhibits them; they can also serve to increase the social bruising of his/her peers and can be detrimental to the climate of the entire school. The problem is that many of these bruises are not directly observable – or not until they become scars. School psychologists and counselors are familiar with bruised students who act out overtly, but some research suggests that 4.3% of our students carry social-emotional scars of which counselors are unaware (Larson, AERA 2014). To develop a more preventative approach, foster pro-social attitudes and a positive school climate, we need to be able to identify and support the students with hidden bruises as well as intervene with pre-bullies early in their school careers.

Since 2011, Connecticut's Local Education Agencies (LEAs) have been required to purchase or develop a student school climate survey. The rationale for this is that anti-social attitudes and a negative school climate are associated with lower academic achievement, current behavior problems, as well as future criminal behaviors ([DeLisi et al 2013](#) [1]; [Hawkins et al 2000](#) [2]) and suicide ideation ([King et al 2001](#) [3]). There are hundreds of anonymous school climate surveys, but none of them was designed to provide the kind of information that we need to help individual students.

I vividly remember a discussion with a researcher from another LEA who had just administered an anonymous survey. On this survey, one student indicated that he intended to hurt himself. School officials were alerted but only knew the student's gender, race and school (all self reported). Administrators and school psychologists searched as best they could, but could not find nor help this student who was so evidently in need. Thinking about this incident, we decided that anonymity can come at too great a price.

Thus, we decided to develop a statistically valid school climate survey of our own, but one that would also allow us to identify students who perceived themselves to be in social-emotional crisis and/or whose answers suggested they had inadequate coping skills. In other words, we decided to develop a tool that would produce timely, actionable information that school psychologists could use to help individual students in need.

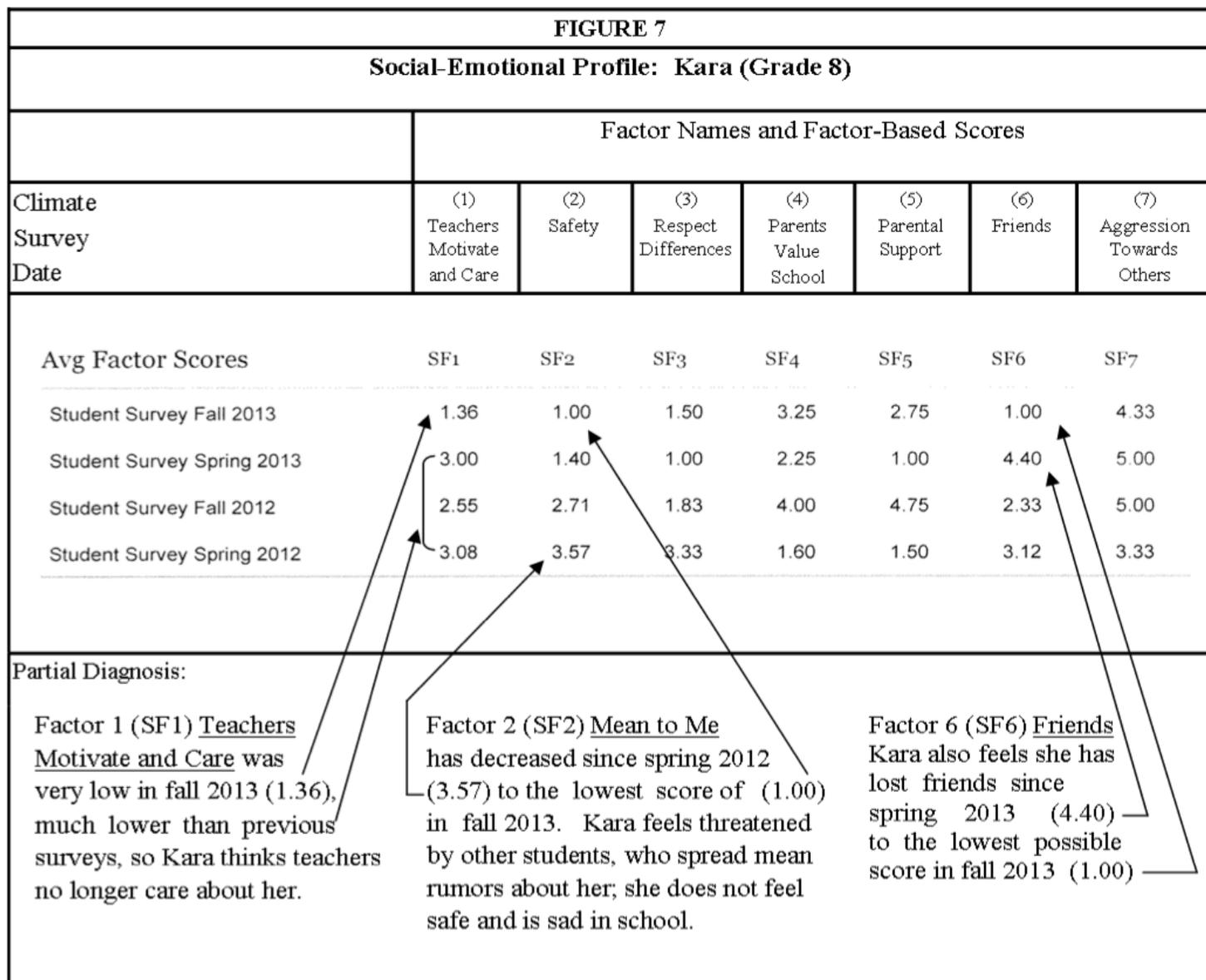
The [Meriden School Climate Survey for Students \(MSCS\\_SV\)](#) [4] is an online, confidential survey – it is *not* an anonymous survey.\* Students in grades 3-12 are informed that the survey is confidential and that their responses will not be shared with anyone, *unless* someone could be harmed or is in danger – we must keep all students safe. The survey measures factors associated with school climate, such as caring, safety, respect and aggression, but it also includes "trigger emails" associated with three key survey items.

The first key survey item asks "How often are mean rumors spread about you?" The second asks "How often are you hit or threatened" in school? And, depending on the student's response, the customized software may also ask "Would you like to tell us about it?" Because students who are hit or threatened, or have mean rumors spread about them are considered to be in harm's way, a trigger email is automatically generated and sent to the building's school psychologist, social worker, administrators and the Office of Research and Evaluation (me). The trigger emails identify the student, his/her response to the survey item of interest, as well as his/her answer to the question "would you like to tell us about it?" – see some anonymous examples [here](#) [5]. At the request of counselors, a third item was added to the trigger email protocol: "At my school, I have a friend who I can really trust." If the student responds he/she does not, a trigger email is sent to counselors.

We first piloted the instrument in June 2011. At that time, I was the only person receiving trigger emails. One student indicated that others were "always" mean to him. The software then asked if he wanted "to tell us about it." The student was experiencing such social-emotional stress that he wrote he was considering suicide. A trigger email was automatically sent to me; within 30 minutes of his response to that survey item, he was in a counselor's office. Whenever I hear of a student suicide or other violent act in the national or state news, I wonder if it could have been prevented had there been a similar confidential survey and intervention system in place in that particular school district.

During the 2012-2014 school years, a team of school psychologists and social workers developed an intervention protocol on how to respond to trigger emails. Since we know each student who completed our survey, we can track changes in these students' perceptions of their schools' climate over time. To estimate Meriden's social-emotional health intervention success, we followed the specific students who activated 115 triggering emails in the fall; all of these students were included in counselor caseloads. By the spring of that school year, 75% of them no longer felt harassed; the remaining 29 students remained in counseling groups.

The figure below displays the social-emotional profile for "Kara," a grade 8 student who has both "low" scores on key factors and "large" decreases on some factors over time. These factor-based scores provide counselors with a reliable measure of Kara's perceptions. Based on Kara's responses to the last four surveys, she feels teachers no longer care about her, other students are increasingly mean to her, and she has lost trusted friend(s) over the summer. According to practicing counselors, these historical social-emotional profiles have been "very helpful."



Through the MSCS-SV, students often name other students who are being mean to them. An administrator told me, half questioning, that one student was complaining that others were being mean to him, "when he was one of the biggest bullies of the school!" I explained that aggression (Factor 7) is one of the ineffective coping skills that children sometimes utilize in school social settings. Overly aggressive students may actually need counseling services and support – not necessarily or exclusively suspensions and expulsions – to learn to curb their inappropriate behaviors toward others. If successful, these interventions are likely to increase other students' perceptions of safety and a positive school climate, which [overly punitive policies](#)

[do not accomplish](#) [6].

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Traditional methods for reporting bullying rely on students to 'tell an adult', such as a teacher, administrator or parent but most students do not ([Bauman 2010](#) [7]) and many suffer silently. These traditional methods do not always work; in fact, researchers have called for more developmentally sensitive methods to report bullying-like behavior ([Bostic & Burnt 2011](#) [8]; [Lyznicki, McCaffree & Robinowitz 2004](#) [9]). The MSCS-SV is a developmentally sensitive tool since students are more comfortable telling a computer than an adult ([Pierce 2009](#) [10]; [Faulkner 2005](#) [11]).

Since 2012, I have shared this work at national and state conferences, receiving positive audience responses and a lot of interest. This positive reaction, coupled with the understanding that we all need to help students in social-emotional need, recently led Meriden Public Schools to make this tool available for free\*\* for use by other districts. One LEA that recently experienced a student suicide is preparing to implement a version of our survey and intervention system beginning next year.

In Meriden, our experience suggests that what we have put in place is an effective early warning system and intervention protocol that can help students develop and maintain pro-social attitudes and effective coping skills, thus minimizing the social-emotional bruising of additional students in our schools. We are eager to share this work and see it put to use to support not only our students but also students across the nation.

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\* The MSCS-SV was based on the National School Climate Standards (2009), piloted, revised and re-administered in the fall and the spring of each school year. The MSCS-SV has seven factors which were verified with confirmatory factor analysis by an independent university researcher with a comparative fit index (CFI) of >.90 (Gage et al 2014; and *in press*, Assessments for Effective Instruction, 2015). The seven factors with reliability coefficients can be viewed [here](#) [12] and the complete survey [here](#) [4]. A key finding in Gage and colleagues was that "respect for others" was a significant protective factor in preventing bullying behavior; as respect for others factor-based scores increase, bullying behaviors decrease.

\*\* The MSCS\_SV is only one component of Meriden's social-emotional health intervention system. In addition to a supportive administration, interested districts need a human support system. The MSCS\_SV core functionality and standard survey questions are available at no charge to other LEAs. Technical support may be required for integration, branding and other tasks. This is a one time cost that should not exceed \$2,500-\$5,000 for a standard setup. Please contact Lori O'Brien at Web Solutions at (203) 235-7777 (Ext. 15) or [Lobrien@websolutions.com](mailto:Lobrien@websolutions.com) [13] for more information.



**Wednesday, October 7, 2015 by Courtney Griffin**

(<http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/author/courtney-griffin/>)

[AISD \(HTTP://WWW.AUSTINMONITOR.COM/STORIES/CATEGORY/AUSTIN/AISD/\)](http://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/category/austin/aisd/)

## **AISD talks prison pipeline; reviews current system**

At Monday's dialogue meeting, AISD trustees took their first look at the state of the district's "school-to-prison pipeline" system, examining the district's policies and practices that push students out of the classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Speaking on behalf of municipal courts at the meeting, Judge Sherry Statman said that even misdemeanor offenses carry lifelong consequences for AISD students who enter into the system at a young age.

"We are essentially the first intake valve on the legal side of the school-to-prison pipeline," Statman said. "A Class C theft, for example, could prevent a DREAM Act ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DREAM\\_Act](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DREAM_Act)) child from possibly getting citizenship."

But, in a revelation that did not surprise many board members, AISD and other partnering governmental entities currently have many, somewhat disorganized, programs addressing multiple issues that could lead to a student's future incarceration.

"What we see here ... is a lot of internal stuff going on in schools," said District 3 Trustee Ann Teich, thumbing through a long program list. "This is heavy on internal resources, but I think we really need to work on our outside resources."

According to board documents provided to trustees, AISD is spending multiple millions on in-house and out-of-house programs to address potential offenders before students enter the criminal justice system. These initiatives include graduation coaches, youth mentorship programs, residential addiction programs, social service specialists and behavioral-based staff and student training, among others.

Interim Chief of Schools Edmund Oropez did not present data measuring the effectiveness of individual programs, in part because such data is not available for every program. However, he was able to tell board members that the number of students taken off campus for discretionary disciplinary reasons has dropped in the last seven years.

Texas school districts are mandated to remove students from campus if they commit certain offenses, such as bringing a gun to school. But staff is given some discretion in other cases, Oropez said.

According to board documents, 3.4 percent of AISD students were taken off campus in the 2009-2010 school year for nonmandatory disciplinary reasons. The number has dropped to 1.3 percent for the 2013-2014 school year.

Oropez added that AISD's discipline data shows that African-American and Hispanic males were more harshly punished than AISD's other student populations from 2008-2011. Staff members chose to remove those students from campus more often for nonmandatory offenses instead of using other methods, he said.

"Surprisingly, it was the Hispanic administrators that had a higher percentage of (optionally) disciplining Hispanic students. The same was true with African-American students," Oropez said.

As a result, AISD better educated staff members about the trend, Oropez said. In addition, the district now requires staff members to receive administrative approval in order to remove an offending student from a campus. This step added a check to the system, Oropez said.

In regard to mandatory charges, however, Travis County Juvenile Court Associate Judge Texanna Davis added that the number of students graduating with a criminal record is expected to drop given the 84th Texas Legislature's passage of House Bill 2398.

The new law, which went into effect Sept. 1, reduces a former Class C misdemeanor charge for excessive truancy to a civil fine and largely leaves school districts in charge of ensuring student attendance.

Davis presented trustees with a list of program and funding options available at the local court level, including a juvenile drug court and mental health court that seek to provide substance abuse treatment as well as promote pre-adjudicated mental health services to students.

However, she also highlighted a nonprofit organization, Life Anew Restorative Justice (<http://www.elifeanew.com/>), as an effective program that prevents AISD students from entering the court system.

“Martin (Middle School) had over 30 referrals that they were ready to file with truancy court,” Davis said, recalling last year. “That program took over all of those cases, and none of those cases went to court except for one. ... So, I have to tell you, I’m a big advocate of restorative justice (<http://www.utexas.edu/research/cswr/rji/about.html>).”

Life Anew is currently in its second year at Martin Middle School and Akins High School. The program uses group counseling techniques that promote social and emotional learning in order to stem future behavior problems.

Akins student Mercy Castillo, who has participated in Life Anew, spoke to board members Monday to connect the dots.

“Our emotions affect our academics,” she said. “My eighth-grade year, my uncle died, and I got depression. It affected the way I learned. I just didn’t want to be there or talk to anybody.”

Castillo and other students and teachers who have participated in Life Anew told board members that behavior and subsequent discipline and academic problems often stem from personal problems at home. Teachers do not always effectively address the emotional component behind troublesome behaviors and instead focus on punishment or academics, they said. Restorative justice extends conversations among parties in order to uncover the reasons behind behaviors.

Life Anew costs \$35,000 to \$50,000 per campus to implement, according to district documents.

*Photo: Mercy Castillo, along with other students in AISD’s restorative justice program Life Anew, elaborate on how the program helped break the “school-to-prison pipeline” for them to board members Monday.*

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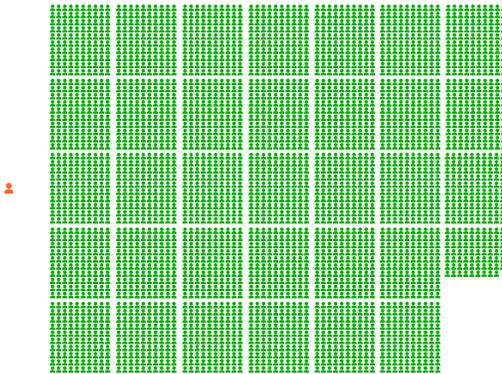
# SAINT PAUL FEDERATION OF TEACHERS BELIEVES THAT OUR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES DESERVE:



## EDUCATION FOR THE WHOLE CHILD

Saint Paul students deserve and benefit from regular access to a wide range of supporting professionals, including school nurses, counselors, social workers and librarians. Schools must ensure that students and their families have easy access to many different kinds of academic and social services.

*There are 3,369 students for every 1 librarian in SPPS*



## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Saint Paul teachers should have time to communicate regularly with parents, with a focus on a shared vision for students, not just reaction to day-to-day behavior. The home visit program should be continued in order to best build productive, long-term partnerships with families.

*“Teachers and parents have the same goals and ideas for their students. There are many powerful forces trying to keep us from talking about them. The SPFT Parent Teacher Home Visit Project is a path to building true partnerships between home and school.”*

— Nick Faber, Secretary, Saint Paul Federation of Teachers

## SMALLER CLASSES

Small class sizes increase the benefits of many other parts of school. They allow for better individual instruction, stronger relationships between teachers and students, more frequent communication between teachers and families, and deeper teacher feedback. Saint Paul students deserve a school system that sustains a focus on small class sizes, especially for our most disadvantaged students.

*“When studies are given equal weight, the literature exhibits systematic evidence of a relationship between class size and achievement.”*

—from “Economic Considerations and Class Size,” Krueger, 2003, p.F59

## TEACHING, NOT TESTING

There is too much pressure in our school system to focus on narrow, culturally biased standardized tests and lockstep curricula. Saint Paul teachers are professionals who can and do have higher expectations for students than these limited tools. They need freedom to teach to those higher expectations using a variety of techniques, to assess the true depth of student learning in culturally relevant ways, and to provide the kind of feedback and differentiation that leads to real learning. Saint Paul students deserve more time for learning and less time spent on testing.

*“Let teachers teach again with creativity, passion and love for students instead of to test scores... Give families a chance to see teachers love their job because they love their students.”*

— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment





### CULTURALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION

Saint Paul students deserve a culturally relevant education. Administrators, teachers and other staff need rich opportunities to learn from each other, and others, how to best serve everyone from the unique cross-section of the world that makes up Saint Paul Public Schools, and to do so at every point in the educational process. Every effort should be made to prioritize the expertise of Saint Paul’s staff of color, the largest percentage of educators of color in the state, to lead this work.

*“All teachers need to implement culturally responsive teaching.”*

*— SPFT member and SPPS teacher, bargaining survey comment*



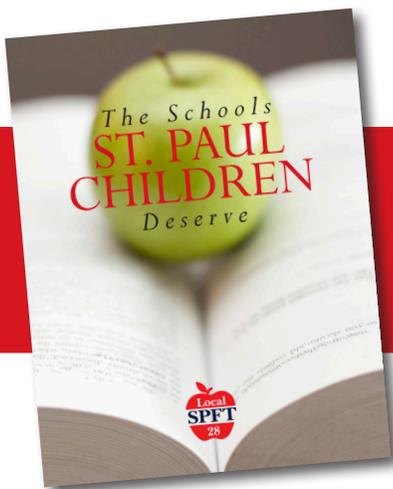
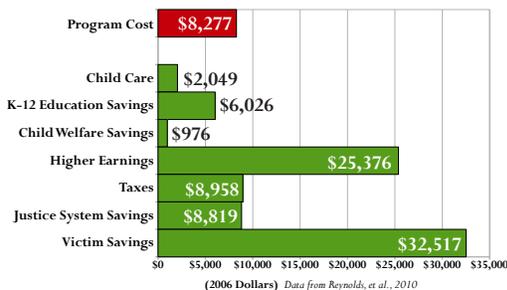
### HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

Saint Paul teachers deserve teacher-directed professional development. It should be led by teachers for purposes such as advancing and enhancing technology usage, assessment practices, differentiation skills, and cultural responsiveness, with a focus on student outcomes and specific methods. Furthermore, teachers should choose the direction of their individual development, so long as that direction is tied to the outcome of their evaluations under Minnesota state statute.

### ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL

Learning begins before students enter kindergarten, and continues after they leave the K-12 system. Every Saint Paul child entering kindergarten in the Saint Paul Public Schools deserves access to a high-quality early childhood education. Additionally, schools should serve as centers of community learning.

### Costs and Benefits of the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program (per participant)



FOR THE FULL TEXT OF “THE SCHOOLS ST. PAUL CHILDREN DESERVE” AND TO VIEW THE SAINT PAUL FEDERATION OF TEACHERS CONTRACT PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS VISIT: [WWW.SPFT.ORG](http://WWW.SPFT.ORG)



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## Teacher-Community Unionism: A Lesson from St. Paul

Mary Cathryn Ricker & squarf; Summer 2015



*Milwaukee school board meeting on privatization, January 23, 2015 (Overpass Light Brigade / Flickr)*

When I was elected president of the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) in 2005, I thought my own story might help transform the relationship between teachers and administrators as well as improve the image of teachers in the community. I was a veteran middle school English teacher, and I'd been honored for my work. And I had been active in the SPFT as a political and community volunteer as well as the union's professional representative on local and state committees.

I had also spent enough time in my classroom and in the city to know—and be bothered by—the dominant story told about public school teachers and our union by the mass media, a number of Minnesota legislators, and in many local communities. On a local TV station's evening news show, a Minnesota Republican state senator, Richard Day, had even declared, "We all know Minneapolis and St. Paul schools suck." In too many conversations, I got accused of failure unless I quickly told people about the awards I had won for creating a model English/language arts classroom and running a program for my colleagues on how to improve writing in middle schools. If local citizens, especially parents, could learn about our talent, our dedication, and our ideas, I was convinced their perceptions would change.

Students in urban public schools deserve teachers who are both creative and optimistic. Additionally, spending many years of your career teaching in an urban setting can stimulate good ideas about how to improve that work.

In St. Paul, we knew we were doing wonderful things both inside and outside the schools. We applied for grants to teach middle school science to students alongside environmental and historical community activists while rebuilding the historic watershed on St. Paul's East Side, a largely working-class neighborhood. We held public sessions where students read their essays and stories. We designed geography and history lessons about the immigration patterns of our city and our students. We lobbied our school board to maintain funding for peer mediation programs. We were thrilled to wake up every morning and share our love of these subjects with our students.

We also knew the value—and the potential—of our union. We were committed to achieving a high-quality, universal public school experience for every child. The members of the SPFT could be on the frontlines advocating that goal, and our contract could be the document that helped make it happen.

But first, we had to parry negative images about us. Administrators and politicians treated students and their families as the “consumers” of an educational system, whereas we saw them as partners in building better schools. That consumerist mentality framed us as nameless and faceless workers, instead of people who were forging relationships with children and their families. It's no wonder that the notion of teachers as greedy and lazy had taken hold.

To dispel that falsehood, we had to forge an active bond with the people we served. St. Paul is a city of about 300,000 people. Over three-quarters of children in public schools belong to communities of color, and more than a third speak English as a new language. Over 70 percent of students in St. Paul qualify for a free or reduced-priced lunch. Only by talking, listening, and working with our students and their families could we change the pernicious perception of teachers and become the union we aspired to be.

The first step was quite simple: to talk to one another. In union meetings, we deliberately discussed why we became educators in the first place, what public schools meant to us, what unions meant to us, and what a decent contract would look like. We crafted *A New Narrative for Teachers, Educators, and Public Education*, which became our guiding document. Our narrative was anchored by five key themes: we are committed to building a good society; we believe in honoring the value of and cultivating each student's potential; we believe that working in community is essential to student success; and we believe that educating students is a craft that requires talented and committed professionals. We are committed to working collectively as a powerful force for justice, change, and democracy.

We read from this document at the beginning of nearly every union meeting. We shared it with new teachers and asked them if this was the kind of union they wanted to join. We relied on it so much that the *Narrative* practically had a seat on our executive board. It was not unusual for a union leader to ask, in response to a question or during a debate: “What does the *Narrative* say we should do about this?”

One practice that clearly needed to change was how we negotiated our contracts. By Minnesota law, public-employee contract negotiations are open to the public; anyone can attend and observe the negotiations. Usually, a union team of five or six members sits across the table from administrators. But in 2009, we invited special education teachers to attend, and encouraged them to invite members of the families they served. In one session, we even had the traditional bargaining team get up and join the audience to allow special education teachers to advocate directly for themselves.

These actions were limited, but we learned a great deal from them. We learned not to assume that members were too busy to participate in negotiations. We also learned that families were interested in collaborating with their teachers and education assistants on issues that affected them all.

In 2011, we went into contract negotiations with a more developed plan to democratize the process. We encouraged *anyone* involved with the education of St. Paul children to attend. We managed to schedule negotiations on the same evening every week—Thursdays from 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.—to help fit it into busy lives. The first session attracted just eight people, but the audience grew steadily after that. By

the end of the nine-month-long process, nearly a hundred union members, parents, and others from the St. Paul community were showing up—and we had both parent and rank-and-file voices on our side of the table.

We focused on demands to improve the quality of our teaching. We want to expand a successful pilot program in which teachers helped one another. We wanted to require that any teacher who applied for a leadership position have a recent evaluation of their classroom performance on file. And we wanted to see that class sizes would not vary widely over time. We also wanted administrators to recognize Future Educators of St. Paul, our union's program to encourage local high school students to become teachers, as a valid extracurricular activity.

Over time, we built trust within our ranks and with the residents of St. Paul who cared about and had a stake in the health of the public schools. The more we engaged them, the more they believed in our cause and our motives. One union member stood up at a negotiation meeting and said: "I came to prove that you guys weren't doing your jobs at the table and that you were slacking off—selling us out—and what I learned was that you are fighting relentlessly for us."

"Us" had become the rank-and-file members who no longer felt the negotiations were being conducted behind their backs. Now, local shop stewards were being treated as leaders in the process instead of just following orders. "Us" had become a neighborhood group that had been organizing independently but were now our partners. "Us" became parents who attended negotiations and shared their hopes and dreams for their children in our public schools at the bargaining table. Dora Jones, executive director of Mentoring Young Adults, who came to work very closely with us through the last two contract campaigns said, "We can talk to the school board all day and try to make changes there, but if we don't really start dealing with the issues inside of that classroom—where the teachers are every day—then we are not really going to change anything."

Of course, tensions within the union did not suddenly vanish. One group of members, hoping to gain higher wages and better fringe benefits, wanted to push further than others wanted to go. Some veteran negotiators on our side were anxious about bargaining in the presence of other members. We spent time talking this through and, at the end of our conversations, it came down to one question, "Do you ever recall saying anything at the bargaining table that you wouldn't have wanted our members to hear?" The answer was an emphatic "No!"

With our contract set to expire on June 30, 2013, I knew we had to prepare well before that and engage the community in the process along the way. So in the fall of 2012, eight months before our contract was set to expire, we began two monthly study groups—or book clubs—made up of a cross-section of members, parents and community members that met monthly until April 2013. One group read *The Schools Our Children Deserve* by Alfie Kohn; the other group studied *Teaching 2030* by the Center for Teaching Quality.

With the help of each book, the groups tackled three big questions: what are the schools St. Paul students deserve? Who are the teachers St. Paul students deserve? What is the profession those teachers deserve?

In April 2013, the study groups presented their contract ideas to our union's executive board. The priorities included: educating the whole child, authentic family engagement, smaller and more predictable class sizes, more teaching and less testing, culturally relevant education, high-quality professional development for teachers and education assistants, and a significant increase in access to our pre-school program. After a thoughtful discussion, we adopted their priorities and directed the union's bargaining teams to negotiate on that basis. We dubbed this plan "The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve." We were realizing the kind of partnership with the community we had begun to build four years earlier.

Unfortunately, negotiators for the school district did not share our vision. Together with some elected officials, they balked at negotiating with a union that didn't behave in the narrow way they expected a union to behave. For years we had been told that "unions would be respected more if you acted differently and showed that you cared about students." But now, school district officials and the lawyer they had hired to negotiate for them were essentially scolding us to get back in our box and "act like a union." It was apparently "not our job" to concern ourselves with these teaching and learning issues.

In Minnesota, matters not directly related to a teacher's wages, benefits, or working conditions are permissive, not mandatory subjects of bargaining. Of the twenty-nine community-supported proposals we presented in May 2013, district representatives refused to negotiate on twenty of them. For the first time in history, they hired an attorney to be their lead negotiator. She correctly pointed out that state law did not compel them to negotiate about class size, the expansion of early childhood education, or hiring an adequate number of school nurses, librarians, and counselors.

But we would not drop these or other issues in our contract campaign that we thought were important, simply because the lawyer said so. We knew these were all permissible areas of negotiations. We would make the case that it was in everyone's interest to have agreements that made progress in each of these areas. So we arranged for representatives of the union, parents, and the larger community to present their views directly to the district negotiating team.

In September 2013 the board's team unilaterally closed negotiations to the public in the only way they could: by calling for mediation. We weren't deterred. We knew we had the community on our side, and frankly, they didn't appreciate having their ideas cast aside. At 5:00 p.m. on September 19, 2013, the district bargaining team walked into a room filled with over seventy-five people and journalists from both local newspapers, read their letter, and immediately walked out—a series of smartphone photos, gasps, and scattered hissing followed them. Because a small group of students, parents, and union members had been assembled to testify that evening on behalf of improved counselor-and-social-worker-to-student ratios and dependable access to physical education and librarians, we reassembled, listened to their prepared testimony and then opened it up to hear what the audience had to say. The audience—made up of SPFT members, parents, and community members as well as our student presenters—brainstormed ways to continue the public dialogue about our priorities now that open negotiations were no longer possible for us.

We knew we had the upper hand if we could rally the community that had worked to create these solutions only to have them dismissed; and so we went to work. We made phone calls, knocked on doors, put up "St. Paul kids deserve" yard signs (or, in our case, snow-bank signs) and let people fill in what they liked. We held "walk-ins" inspired by the organizers of Moral Mondays in North Carolina. Only, we held our walk-ins at the main entrance of nearly every school in the district at the end of January 2014, in a blizzard.

Some 2,500 teachers, education assistants, parents, students, and community members started their day by rallying for the schools our children deserve. Photos of signs were posted on Twitter proclaiming "St. Paul Kids Deserve Preschool"; Facebook posts depicted dozens of educators and their students outside a school, covered in snow, rallying with parents for reasonable class sizes or "More Teaching, Less Testing." Some teachers played drums, others made up chants like "What do we want? Happy students!" or adapted the lyrics of popular songs to our cause.

Finally, SPFT members voted to authorize a strike. Our primary demands were better access to preschool, consistent class sizes, more teaching and less testing, and equitable access to nurses, librarians, counselors, social workers, art, music, and physical education. Two days before our last scheduled mediation, we held a rally in front of the district headquarters before the school board met.

Parent after parent spoke to the crowd. They then filed into the school board meeting to make their views known.

When that final, mediated negotiation session before our authorized strike vote arrived, we spent almost twenty-four solid hours together with the district's bargaining team—now including three Board of Education members, just for this meeting—negotiating on every contract proposal that was put forward. When we emerged (in the aftermath of another blizzard) we made progress in every priority area advanced by the study groups. And our cars had been shoveled out by a parent and community member, which almost brought us to tears.

In the end, we averted the strike and made progress on nearly every issue for which we had fought. We won a commitment to expand the preschool program and to hire additional nurses, counselors, librarians, and social workers. We won an agreement for reasonable and predictable class sizes and a reduction of standardized testing. We established School Climate Improvement Teams composed of educators and parents who would collaborate to make students of all ethnic and racial backgrounds feel welcome and reduce the number of suspensions and other measures used to discipline children. We also successfully negotiated a method of redesigning schools to replace the mandated school restructuring process, which had until then forced school closings, turned schools over to Charter management organizations, or forced removal of half the teachers. Our process would be teacher-led, allow teachers and parents to design school programs together, and draw on the assets of the communities in which schools were based.

In a larger sense, we felt vindicated by the democratic process we had created. Members of all the groups who had worked together asked one other, "What comes next?" I had negotiated almost a dozen previous contracts for the SPFT. But, for the first time, I felt that signing a contract was just one step in building a larger movement.

Later that year, in summer of 2014, I was elected executive vice-president of the national AFT. But the union-community partnership I helped build in St. Paul is a natural extension of the priority my national union has given to community engagement, since we seek to improve our teaching and our schools, and not simply file grievances and try to protect our wages and benefits. Similar things are taking place in Chicago, Los Angeles, Toledo, New Haven, Albuquerque, and elsewhere. In local after local, teachers are rebutting those who view them as failures. Everyone is learning that teachers can be a powerful force to create the kind of schools their students deserve.

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