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Peer Mediation: A New Opportunity in St. Louis City Schools

By Beatrice Connaghan*

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights released data sets on education and civil rights issues within U.S. public schools.¹ According to the data set, over 1,700 St. Louis Public School students were given out-of-school suspensions in 2017.² Students missed a total of 8,153 school days because of suspensions, with Black and African American students missing almost 7,500 days.³ That same year, 46 individual students were referred to law enforcement and 41 students had a school-related arrest.⁴ The vast majority of these students were Black male youth with a registered disability.⁵

Anti-violence advocates have circled in on the correlation between school disciplinary experiences and later arrests in adulthood.⁶ This link, among others, is viewed as a key part of the school to prison pipeline.⁷ The ACLU describes the "pipeline" phenomena as a national trend where adolescents enter the juvenile and criminal justice systems after leaving school.⁸ The

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¹ Dep't of Educ., *Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC)*, OFFICE FOR CIV. RTS. (December 10, 2021), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/data.html>.

² Civ. Rts. Data Collection, *St. Louis City, St. Louis, MO: LEA Summary of Selected Facts* (2017), <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/profile/9/district/28024/summary>.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ ACLU, *School to Prison Pipeline: What's at Stake* (2022), <https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/juvenile-justice-school-prison-pipeline>.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

students are “funneled,” as the ACLU explains, from one punitive system to another.⁹ While there are several factors that create and uphold the school to prison pipeline, studies show that suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary measures are directly related to students’ interactions with the law enforcement later in life.¹⁰ In one study based in North Carolina, researchers found that students who attended schools with high suspension rates were substantially more likely to be arrested in adulthood.¹¹ The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education released a report in 2014 stating that high school students who were suspended or expelled were 10 times more likely to drop out and face incarceration as adults.¹² For school-aged adolescents across the U.S., school suspensions have serious, life-long consequences.

In 2021, Conflict Resolution Center St. Louis (CRCSTL) and the St. Louis Youth Violence Prevention Commission (STLVPC) came together to create an innovative solution to youth violence and incarceration in the city of St. Louis.¹³ CRCSTL is a nonprofit community mediation center and provides

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Andrew Bacher-Hicks, Stephen Billings, & David Deming, *Proving the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 21 EDUC. NEXT (July 27, 2021), <https://www.educationnext.org/proving-school-to-prison-pipeline-stricter-middle-schools-raise-risk-of-adult-arrests/>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Policy statement from the U.S. Dep’t of Health and Hum. Serv. and the U.S. Dep’t of Educ., *Policy Statement on Expulsion and Suspension Policies in Early Childhood Settings*, 3 (2014).

¹³ Conflict Resol. Center St. Louis, *Student Led Peer Mediation*, 5 (2021) (accessible at <https://www.crcstl.org/peermediation>).

mediation and community building services in the city of St. Louis.¹⁴ The STLVPC advocates and promotes policies and systems both at governmental and community levels that address violence in St. Louis.¹⁵ Together, the groups created a new student-led peer mediation program targeting St. Louis City public schools.¹⁶

Schools and communities across the world have utilized peer mediation programs for decades.¹⁷ The phrase “peer mediation” can describe a variety of different programs components, including actual student to student mediations with peer facilitators as well as negotiation trainings for entire student bodies.¹⁸ In its booklet detailing the new student-led peer mediation program, CRCSTL describes peer mediation as a “process where trained students act as neutral mediators” to assist their peers in developing their own unique solutions to conflicts without the intervention of school administration.¹⁹ They state that the peer mediation program will help

¹⁴ *Id.* at 2.

¹⁵ Home, Youth Violence Prevention Comm’n (2019), <https://www.stlareavpc.org>.

¹⁶ Conflict Resol. Center, *supra* note 13.

¹⁷ See generally Shay Bilchik, Adm’r of the Office of Juv. Just. and Delinq. Prevention, *Conflict Resolution* (March 1995); ABA Resols. Podcast, *Preparing for the Future with Peer Mediation in Schools: A Conversation with Anne Sawyer and Dr. Pamela Kreiser*, AMERICAN BAR ASS’N (March 16, 2022), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/dispute_resolution/resources/resolutions-a-podcast-about-dispute-resolution-and-prevention/preparing-for-the-future-with-peer-mediation-in-schools/; David W. Johnson & Roger T. Johnson, *Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research*, Vol. 61 REVIEW OF EDUC. RESEARCH No. 4; Thalia González, *Keeping Kids in Schools: Restorative Justice, Punitive Discipline, and the School to Prison Pipeline*, THE SELECTED WORKS OF THALIA GONZÁLEZ (August 2011).

¹⁸ Raija Churchill, *Today’s Children, Tomorrow’s Protectors: Purpose and Process for Peer Mediation in K-12 Education*, 13 Pepp. Disp. Resol. L. J. Iss. 2, 363, 369 (2013).

¹⁹ Conflict Resol. Center, *supra* note 13.

students uncover root causes of conflicts and build a stronger, more inclusive school community.²⁰ Other scholars state that peer mediation is about facilitated conversations with a focus on developing problem solving skills for life.²¹ Peer mediation is also a form of restorative justice, which is a method of conflict management where students are reintegrated into the student body instead of removed after an act of aggression or misconduct.²² To begin designing the new St. Louis based peer mediation program, the organizations employed three St. Louis City students to share their thoughts on school conflict and suspensions. “Students get suspended every day for things that could just be talked out,” stated one student.²³ Another student reflected that “Conflict can quickly escalate to physical violence if you are not learning how to solve the problems and cope.”²⁴ Scholarly research shows that peer mediation has an impact on lowering suspensions and other disciplinary proceedings in elementary and high schools for precisely the reasons these students described.

In one California middle school, researchers found that punitive disciplinary actions decreased after the administration implemented a peer mediation program as their primary disciplinary method.²⁵ All staff

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ ABA Resolutions Podcast, *supra* note 17 at 4:00.

²² González, *supra* note 17 at 5.

²³ Conflict Resol. Center, *supra* note 13 at 6.

²⁴ *Id.* at 7.

²⁵ Michael D. Sumner, Carol J. Silverman, & Mary Louise Frampton, *School-Based Restorative Justice as an Alternative to Zero-Tolerance Policies: Lessons from West Oakland*,

members were initially trained in the conflict resolution methods.²⁶ Later, the administration slowly expanded the program to include student mediators in order to ensure all participants and leaders were adequately trained.²⁷ Students and teachers at the school used peer mediation to address a wide variety of concerns, including student-teacher conflicts, jealousy and conflicts between friends, inter-peer bullying, and substance use on school property.²⁸ One student participant reported that "...normally when I get into a conflict, my instinct is to fight. But restorative justice kinda [sic] taught me to calm down a bit, taught me to talk it out more."²⁹

During the first year of the program, the school experienced an 87% reduction in suspensions; before peer mediation, one in two students were suspended every year.³⁰ The rate of students forced to leave the school for disciplinary reasons also decreased and in 2007 the school was below the district average for expulsions.³¹ While the study did not report on whether students entered the criminal justice system after graduation, fewer

Thelton E. Henderson Center for Soc. Just., U. of Cal., Berkeley, Sch. of L., 10 (year unknown).

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 13-14.

²⁹ *Id.* at 15.

³⁰ Michael D. Sumner, Carol J. Silverman, & Mary Louise Frampton, *supra* note 25 at 31.

³¹ *Id.*

disciplinary interactions in educational settings has a correlation with a lower chance of arrest in adulthood.³²

In Missouri, a similar program was created and implemented in 2013 at a public magnet school in St. Louis city.³³ Although the school is now closed, the effects of the student-to-student mediation created a positive impact on the student body.³⁴ The teachers and administrators of the school began the program as a response to the school to prison pipeline.³⁵ They saw the program as an opportunity to address conduct issues at school without resorting to suspensions or expulsions.³⁶ After one year of peer mediations at the school, the number of total suspensions dropped from 107 per year to only 38. The following year, the number of suspensions continued to decrease.³⁷ Additionally, the students, teachers, and administration reported high satisfaction with the program.³⁸

The new CRCSTL sponsored student led peer mediation program is hoping for similar results. Kristin Watt, the program coordinator of the peer mediation program, stated that mediation training will begin with St. Louis

³² U.S. Dep't of Health and Hum. Serv., *supra* note 12 at 3.

³³ Joshua Saleem, *A Missouri school takes steps to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline*, AFSC: QUAKER ACTION FOR A JUST WORLD (Nov. 15, 2016), <https://www.afsc.org/blogs/news-and-commentary/missouri-school-takes-steps-to-disrupt-school-to-prison-pipeline>.

³⁴ *Id.*; *Northwest Academy of Law*, St. Louis Public Sch. (last visited Sept. 17, 2022), <https://www.slps.org/domain/2550>.

³⁵ Saleem, *supra* note 33.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

city students in Winter 2023.³⁹ As of September 2022, Watt and her team have been working directly with partner schools to assess their needs and goals for the peer mediation program.⁴⁰ Watt explained that CRCSTL's hope is "to unite with each school to implement an innovative Student-Led Peer Mediation program that will foster student development and create healthy and productive methods of resolving conflict in the school community."⁴¹ She stated that she is hopeful the program will decrease punitive student disciplinary measures like suspensions and that students are empowered to "have a choice in the outcome of the conflicts they experience."⁴² Watt notes that although change will not happen overnight, she is hopeful that the students, teachers, and communities that participate in student-led peer mediation see positive and lasting results in their relationships and life trajectory.⁴³

Edited by Allison Frisella

³⁹ Interview with Kristin Watt, Student Led Peer Mediation Program Coordinator, CRCSTL (Sept. 15, 2022).

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*