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Opening Up, Students Transform a Vicious Circle

By [PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN](#)

OAKLAND, Calif. — There is little down time in Eric Butler’s classroom.

“My daddy got arrested this morning,” Mercedes Morgan, a distraught senior, told the students gathered there.

Mr. Butler’s mission is to help defuse grenades of conflict at Ralph J. Bunche High School, the end of the line for students with a history of getting into trouble. He is the school’s coordinator for restorative justice, a program increasingly offered in schools seeking an alternative to “zero tolerance” policies like suspension and expulsion.

The approach now taking root in 21 Oakland schools, and in Chicago, Denver and Portland, Ore., tries to nip problems and violence in the bud by forging closer, franker relationships among students, teachers and administrators. It encourages young people to come up with meaningful reparations for their wrongdoing while challenging them to develop empathy for one another through “talking circles” led by facilitators like Mr. Butler.

Even before her father’s arrest on a charge of shooting at a car, Mercedes was prone to anger. “When I get angry, I blank out,” she said. She listed some reasons on a white board — the names of friends and classmates who lost their lives to Oakland’s escalating violence. Among them was Kiante Campbell, a senior [shot and killed](#) during a downtown arts festival in February. His photocopied image was plastered around Mr. Butler’s room, along with white roses left from a restorative “grief circle.”

Restorative justice adopts some techniques of the circle practice that is a way of life for indigenous cultures, fostering collaboration. Students speak without interruption, for example, to show mutual respect.

“A lot of these young people don’t have adults to cry to,” said Be-Naiah Williams, an after-school coordinator at Bunche whose 21-year-old brother was gunned down two years ago in a nightclub. “So whatever emotion they feel, they go do.”

Oakland expanded the program after an initial success six years ago. Since then, the need for an alternative discipline has become more urgent: Last year, the district faced a Department of Education civil rights investigation into high suspension and expulsion rates, particularly among African-American boys.

A [report by the Urban Strategies Council](#), a research and policy organization in Oakland, showed that African-American boys made up 17 percent of the district’s enrollment but 42 percent of all suspensions, and were six times more likely to be

suspended than their white male classmates. Many disciplinary actions were for “defiance” — nonviolent infractions like texting in class or using profanity with a teacher.

A body of research indicates that lost class time due to suspension and expulsion results in alienation and often early involvement with the juvenile justice system, said Nancy Riestenberg, of the Minnesota Department of Education, an early adopter of restorative justice. Being on “high alert” for violence is not conducive to learning, she added.

Many studies have concluded that zero-tolerance policies do not make schools safer.

“We’re a terribly violent community,” said Junious Williams, the chief executive of the Urban Strategies Council. “We have not done very much around teaching kids alternatives to conflict that escalates into violence.”

Among the lost youngsters was Damon Smith, now an A student at Bunche, who said he had been suspended more than 15 times. “You start thinking it’s cool,” he said. “You think you’re going to come back to school and catch up, but unless you’re a genius you won’t. It made me want to mess up even more.”

Damon, 18, said restorative justice sessions helped him view his behavior through a different lens. “I didn’t know how to express emotions with my mouth. I knew how to hit people,” he said. “I feel I can go to someone now.”

Eight of Oakland’s participating schools have full-time coordinators like Mr. Butler, whose work is financed by the nonprofit [Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth](#). He is often called on to handle delicate situations: 90 percent of the 250 students at Bunche have had run-ins with the juvenile system or lived in foster homes.

In one circle, students discussed racism. In another, a girl confided that she had been molested as a child. “Those boys who looked scary wrapped their arms around this girl,” Mr. Butler said. “That’s what’s missing for our kids. It’s harder to fight people you feel a closeness to.”

Recently, it appeared that jealousy had triggered a fight between two classmates. Ebony Monroe, a new student, was wearing short shorts. Jameelah Garry, who recently had a baby, was wearing a baggy flannel shirt. Jameelah slugged her. “I don’t like her,” she explained.

“If your kid was in this situation, what advice would you give her?” Mr. Butler asked gently.

Jameelah went silent, then said, “I got an anger problem, I’ll be honest with you.” She started to cry, tears welling up on glue-on eyelashes. “I lost my brother last year,” she said. “Charles. He was shot in the head after an altercation in East Oakland.”

She took off a sleeve to reveal a teal tattoo in his memory. No one at the school had known.

Betsy Steele, the principal, said that without the circle, and the trust it developed, the major source of Jameelah's bad behavior would not have been discovered and might have escalated.

Since the program started, the school reduced its overall suspension rate to 8 percent in 2012 from 12 percent in 2011.

But restorative justice is not a quick fix, teachers' union officials and legal experts warn. "You're changing a culture that has been in place for a long time," said [Mary Louise Frampton](#), an adjunct law professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "It's a multiyear process."

It is also not a treatment for mental illness or ideal for situations with major power imbalances, like bullying, said Barbara McClung, the district's coordinator for behavior health initiatives. "Not every student will acknowledge they caused harm," she added.

Approaches to restorative justice vary nationwide. Some districts allow suspensions and expulsions but now require stricter justification. Others, under pressure to reduce suspensions, put students on "administrative leave" instead. Some schools focus on formal mediation and reparation while others, like Bunche, are more spontaneous.

A recent circle at Bunche for Jeffrey, who was on the verge of expulsion for habitual vandalism, included an Oakland police officer, and the conversation turned to the probability that Jeffrey would wind up incarcerated or on the streets. The student had told Mr. Butler that he was being pressured to join a gang.

"Cat, you got five people right now invested in your well-being," Mr. Butler told him. "This is a matter of life or death." Jeffrey agreed to go to Mr. Butler's classroom every day at third period to do his schoolwork.

Mr. Butler, who grew up in a vast segregated housing project in New Orleans, knows the urge for retribution: Two years ago, his sister was murdered by her boyfriend. "I wanted my quart of blood," he told students disturbed by Kiante Campbell's death.

Then the boyfriend's mother showed up, seeking forgiveness. "This brave little woman knocked on the door in her robe and flip-flops," he told his classroom. "The want for revenge in my stomach lifted."

Keeping students in school, focused on the future, is at the core of his work. So every Friday afternoon he tells them: "Y'all gotta come back Monday. Come back. I gotta see you."

"We're all we've got," he said. "And we need to start thinking that way."