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City preparing to expand restorative justice programs

by Jackie Schechter on June 20, 2014

As discipline code revisions delayed, advocates want some suspensions banned



PHOTO: Jackie Schechter

Inside Validus Preparatory Academy in the Bronx, which has a number of restorative justice programs.

The city is poised to dramatically expand restorative justice programs aimed at improving school climate and rethinking school discipline next year.

The head of the Department of Education’s Office of Safety and Youth Development verbally committed to provide new support for restorative justice programs at a May meeting about school discipline issues, according to two attendees. Though few details of the expansion have been finalized, the agreement represents the administration’s first step toward enacting discipline policy changes that Chancellor Carmen Fariña and Mayor Bill de Blasio have both called for.

On Friday, a department spokeswoman said officials had been consulting with a number of organizations focused on school discipline, including Dignity in Schools. The New York chapter has been meeting monthly with the safety office to create a plan that would begin in January 2015, according to Elana Eisen-Markowitz, a teacher at the Urban Assembly Bronx Academy of Letters who attended the May meeting.

As opposed to punitive policies like suspension, [restorative justice programs](#) such as peer mediation and student justice panels look to change students’ behaviors. Restorative practices often end with resolutions meant to repair relationships, like writing an apology



note or helping out a teacher.

Restorative justice is not about trying to replace suspensions entirely, educators stress, but instead about “creating space to support a positive school environment,” as Dignity in Schools Campaign Coordinator Shoshi Chowdhury said.

Implementing these programs school-wide requires funding and training. Dignity in School’s [December 2013 proposal](#) outlines a pilot program that would involve 10 schools,

each of which would receive \$175,000 annually for five years. The money would be used to hire and train restorative justice coordinators and support training for school staff members.

At the May meeting, safety office head Elayna Konstan did not agree to specific dollar amounts, but did suggest increasing the number of schools involved to 20, according to Eisen-Markowitz.

Over the past few years, the Department of Education has been building its capacity to implement restorative justice programs. The department has provided training to teachers from 55 middle and high schools through the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, which will be training 45 more schools this July and plans to add another 45 in the fall.

At Flushing International High School, where students hail from over 40 countries, social worker Tania Romero said that restorative practices have decreased incidences of violence between students of different nationalities and allowed for deeper conversations on issues like racism.

“All schools should be entitled to this,” she said.

The details of the current plan—including how schools will be selected and the amount of funding each school will receive—have yet to be finalized. Chowdhury said her organization is hoping to hear a definite plan within the next month.

Ultimately, Dignity in Schools wants to see a restorative justice coordinator at every school in the city. “We understand that overhauling takes time,” Chowdhury said. “It’s not going to happen in a year or two years.”

The Dignity in Schools proposal describes the restorative justice coordinator as a full-time employee tasked with “the sole focus of coordinating a positive, restorative climate and approach to discipline at the school.” The coordinator would implement a mix of restorative justice programs, train school staff, involve students and parents, and collect data to determine program effectiveness.

The department would not comment directly on the restorative justice expansion or provide the number of existing programs citywide. In a statement, a department spokeswoman said that “Identifying alternatives that reduce the need for suspensions is a top priority for Chancellor Fariña.”

She said that the department has been meeting with Dignity in Schools, the NYCLU, the Osborne Association, Urban Youth Collaborative, as well as with Judith Kaye, New York state’s former chief judge who has worked extensively on restorative and juvenile justice efforts, and school principals.

De Blasio called for an expansion of the programs as public advocate, and Fariña noted her desire to [expand restorative justice](#) in a speech to 600 principals in May, saying, “Our schools are learning places, not suspension places.”

Meanwhile, the James Baldwin School in Chelsea, which runs a number of restorative justice programs, has plans to hire a restorative justice coordinator regardless of the department's next move.

"We feel like we have the capacity [for restorative justice] among our teaching staff," explained Principal Brady Smith. "The piece we feel like we need to enhance is that point person."

Next week, Chalkbeat will publish in-depth looks at restorative justice programs and suspension policies in New York City. Stay in the loop by signing up for our [morning newsletter](#).

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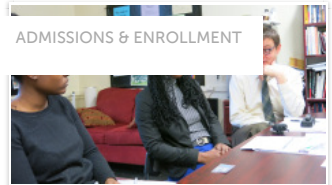
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