

# RESTORATIVE JUSTICE Journeys

How Three D.C. Schools Improved School Culture and Climate

Featuring Profiles of:

COLUMBIA HEIGHTS EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS

THURGOOD MARSHALL ACADEMY PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

WASHINGTON YU YING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL



SchoolTalk



RestorativeDC

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# INTRODUCTION

For too long, schools have employed discipline policies that rely on suspensions and expulsions as a way of responding to student misbehavior. In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that these punitive approaches do not actually address underlying challenges, repair harm, or help build and foster healthy relationships. Instead, they simply exclude students from the learning environment, setting students on a negative trajectory that aims them away from the education system and towards the criminal justice system.

There is growing recognition that this approach does not meet the developmental needs of our students and impedes their learning. Schools need to take greater responsibility for building positive school cultures and giving teachers and students the skills they need to communicate effectively and trust and respect one another. This work is not just “reactive” to problems, but more “proactive” in building a healthy school culture based on trust and open communication.

**Restorative justice is a philosophy and set of supporting practices that center a community on equitable and inclusive relationships.** It has its roots in indigenous approaches to living in relationship with others, including traditions of storytelling in circles and reintegrating those who have harmed others within the community. Restorative circles use structured, facilitated processes to build connection, understanding, and trust within a group of individuals. Educators can use circles to build community, teach academic lessons, discuss hot topics, hold difficult conversations, engage families, and develop social-emotional skills. In addition to circles, restorative justice involves other restorative practices, such as the use of affective statements, restorative questions and conversations, relationship building, and more.

There is a national movement to bring the philosophy and supporting practices of restorative justice into schools to help promote school safety and stability and ensure that everyone in the school building feels included and has a voice. For several years now, public and public charter schools in the District have been adopting and implementing restorative justice policies and practices. In this later stage of the Covid-19 pandemic, restorative justice is more relevant than ever as students and teachers work to overcome unresolved stress, anxiety, and trauma.

In our work in collaborating with D.C. schools, we often reiterate the importance of viewing **restorative justice as a journey, not a destination**. It is not a “program” that gets dropped into a school or something that a few people can champion and many others can ignore. For this new mindset to take hold and to really shift the school culture and climate takes time, leadership, and commitment by the entire school community to change how behavior issues are handled, build connections, and value social and emotional growth alongside academic growth.

We offer stories from three different D.C. schools as a way of helping other school leaders and educators see the powerful impact restorative justice practices can have for students and staff—and what it takes to sustain those changes over time.

SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC’s Whole School implementation work with the three schools in these profiles is funded by the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

# COLUMBIA HEIGHTS EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS



**CHEC**  
COLUMBIA HEIGHTS  
EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS



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## **COLUMBIA HEIGHTS EDUCATIONAL CAMPUS BRINGING RESTORATIVE PRACTICES TO LIFE ON CAMPUS & ACROSS D.C.**

*In a large educational facility like Columbia Heights Educational Campus (CHEC) that includes both a middle and high school as well as a nonprofit student-supporting organization, relationships and connections matter so that no one gets lost. For the last several years, CHEC staff have been working to implement restorative practices to help close the distance between and among adults and students and keep those connections alive throughout a student's time in the school. While academics have always been prioritized at this global-themed, bilingual campus, in recent years, the school has sought to put equal emphasis on helping students and the staff feel engaged and supported.*



**Columbia Heights Educational Campus (CHEC)**—in Washington, D.C.’s Columbia Heights neighborhood—is a 6–12 grade school serving over 1500 students from over 67 countries, with over 40 home languages spoken; nearly every student qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Ninety-seven percent of CHEC students are on track to be first-generation college students.

The school became CHEC in 2008, when Bell Multicultural High School and feeder school Lincoln Multicultural Middle School merged, shortly after Bell moved into a brand new facility on 16<sup>th</sup> Street in Columbia Heights. The campus is now made up of the middle and high school and the Multicultural Career Intern Program (MCIP), a nonprofit organization supporting students at CHEC and other D.C. high schools. CHEC prides itself on its foundation in the values of academic

rigor, curriculum relevance, and social justice with a “rigorous, globally inspired, college preparatory curriculum that readies students for challenges both in and out of the classroom.”

There are many things that make CHEC unique, but perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic is the tenure of the school’s leadership. Principal Maria Tukeva has led the school in its numerous iterations (starting with MCIP that eventually became part of Bell) for 36 years. She is the longest-serving principal in the modern era of the D.C. public school system.

For over five years, CHEC has been on a journey to become a restorative school—a school where restorative practices are the foundation of the school climate. As you will read, a restorative journey is not always linear, especially at a large, complex organization like CHEC. Here are some of the highlights of CHEC’s path over the last several years as they undertook this effort.

When SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC first started working with D.C. schools to provide technical assistance, CHEC was one of the first schools interested. So during the 2015-16 school year, one of the student deans sought permission from the principal to introduce restorative practices into the school, and the school began a formal partnership with RestorativeDC to implement its Whole School model.



During this initial year, the school created an active restorative justice implementation team and designated staff member Ryan Duvall as the full-time restorative justice coordinator. This implementation team focused on building internal capacity within the team to use restorative practices and introduce the core principles of restorative justice to the broader CHEC staff.

Restorative justice practices are generally considered either “proactive” or “responsive.” Proactive practices build positive school culture and interpersonal communication skills to prevent or defuse serious incidents. Responsive practices help address harm or resolve issues after they have occurred. During these early days, much of CHEC’s restorative justice work with staff and students was responsive. First, work began with restorative circles in staff meetings to practice restorative strategies. Once the staff felt more comfortable with some of the strategies, the restorative justice team wanted to improve school safety and encourage peaceful resolutions to student conflicts. During this first year, the team worked with SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC to develop a plan that would give teachers and staff the resources and tools they would need while also proactively engaging with students to find solutions. RestorativeDC worked closely with the student deans and the staff who oversaw in-school suspension to find ways to reintegrate students who were frequently getting into trouble back into the school

community. The school also set up a peer mediation system, where trained student mediators helped resolve student conflicts. That spring, the team held a restorative justice boot camp for the entire school staff to teach others to use these new practices.

By the second year, most staff were familiar with many restorative practices and more teachers were finding ways to use circles in their classrooms as a way to build community, establish norms, and check in with each other. The school also made the decision to transform the in-school suspension room into a “Restorative Corner,” signaling the prioritization of inclusion over exclusion. Toward the end of the second year of restorative justice implementation, Mali

## Staff Circles

*“The stronger the connections between all adults responsible for the well-being of the children, the stronger the community will be in its capacity to care for them”*

— Circle Forward

Staff circles can be used to build community among staff, discuss and solve community issues, model and train staff on circle keeping, reflect on climate and culture, and more. These circles can help staff practice equity of voice and break silos among various staff roles.

### EXAMPLES

- Staff team building
- Sustaining ourselves when the work is difficult
- How are the children?
- Exploring our core assumptions

Parke, one of RestorativeDC's restorative justice experts who worked closely with CHEC, saw a dramatic shift within the school, including a broad buy-in from the staff and school community. CHEC's restorative justice work was no longer a pilot project of a few staff, but Tukeva and CHEC's team had elevated

working directly with the school principal, and strengthened student-focus initiatives. In 2020, CHEC's new dean of students, Katherine Avila, began the work of updating its student behavior referral processes and policies to reflect restorative values in CHEC's middle school. This shift in approach reflects



restorative justice beyond a response to behavior concerns to a critical strategy for supporting and improving day-to-day interactions and school culture.

Over the next two years, the school continued deepening and expanding its work. By the third year, the school had integrated regular check-in circles with students into the school schedule at both the middle and high schools, continued


CHEC's intentional change from punitive to restorative mindsets.

By the 2021-22 school year, CHEC's restorative justice implementation progressed, and the school began to incorporate student-led facilitation as part of its restorative approach, programming that would become a highlight of the school's restorative journey.



## A Personal & Professional Journey

Adopting a restorative mindset has been a personal as well as a professional journey for Pankaj Rayamahji. He can point to benefits for the CHEC students and staff, but also that he sees that this new lens has made him a calmer and more empathetic staff member who is better able to respond to moments of crisis and engage productively with students and fellow staff. Rayamahji recalls that he had been at CHEC for a year or two when he was asked to participate in a restorative conversation with a student who had been pushing his buttons. His supervisors wanted to help him find a way to not react so strongly to the behavior. The experience of having a facilitated conversation with the student was transformative! They calmly discussed what had been going on, and Rayamahji shared why the way the student had interacted with him had not been appropriate. Rayamahji remembers having the feeling of, “Oh, my god, this works!” That was when he “jumped onto the restorative justice bandwagon” and ended up mentoring and building a very positive relationship with the student. When Rayamahji saw the power of restorative Justice firsthand, he became a real champion for it.



## Supporting Adults Through Restorative Practices

Over time, Tukeva began adopting some of the restorative justice strategies her staff were using with students to support relationships between adults in the building. For example, the school leadership team used community-building circles at their school leadership retreat to develop agreements on how to work together during the coming school year. Throughout the course of the year, Parke facilitated intensive restorative conversations between individuals on the leadership team and support staff as needed to improve communication and build positive relationships. Parke also worked with Tukeva to support her as a restorative leader, both in how she was leading the adult culture at the school and in modeling practices she wanted to see take hold across the school. Parke notes that, “Leadership is huge. As much as we want [restorative justice] to be organic and grassroots, once the school was able to set the vision from the top, that really changed things.”

CHEC has the benefit of having had a stable core group of leaders at the helm who have steadily been working to implement and spread restorative practices throughout the school community. In addition, Parke has served as the primary technical assistance provider for five years, and has been able to build and maintain trusting relationships with the core school leaders. Tukeva has empowered her leadership team to step

up. Three of the five original members of the restorative justice implementation team are still on staff, and two are still main points of contact working with RestorativeDC. This continuity is invaluable for institutional knowledge, momentum, and commitment.

### **Integrating Restorative Justice in All Aspects of the School**

One of these leaders is Pankaj Rayamajhi, who now serves as the CHEC's director of operations and logistics. This role is also something that distinguishes CHEC. Since the school is so large and requires a lot of administrative management, CHEC created a new position for strategy, operations, and logistics, one that is now used in many D.C. schools. Rayamajhi stepped into the role, and he now oversees many of the daily items involved in operating a school, including security, procurement, human resources, and maintenance. He was part of the restorative justice implementation team for many years and was able to bring his restorative justice lens to this new role. For instance, when hiring new staff, he looks for people who either have experience with restorative justice or who are open to the restorative process and have the right mindset. With such a campus-wide focus on restorative justice, Rayamajhi's work ensures that everyone in the building is involved in a restorative approach, not just those who work most directly with students.

As a result of this new approach to hiring, CHEC has experienced lower staff turnover and higher retention. The restorative justice team attributes this at least in part to a healthier and more positive school culture. Staff feel like they belong, have a voice, and are supported when they face challenges. CHEC has seen suspension rates go down, and staff report fewer fights and other conflicts because of the active restorative circles and mediations.

### **Restorative Justice & Special Education**

When CHEC moved to infuse restorative justice into all aspects of its work and culture, the charter school





intentionally integrated restorative practices with special education and focused on implementing circles and other practices that were accessible to all students. Restorative practices provide opportunities for students to develop critical social-emotional and self-advocacy skills, both of which are especially important for students with disabilities.

For CHEC, one of the most important steps in integrating restorative justice and special education was creating materials and processes that all students could understand and use. CHEC created templates for students to use during circles and other practices. These templates helped students, including

those with disabilities, to follow along, capture ideas, and improve information recall. When creating these templates and other materials for restorative practice, CHEC staff were able to make modifications based on the needs of specific youth participating. Strategies that helped CHEC develop inclusive materials included using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) elements that provide for multiple means of engaging students, multiple means of representing information, and multiple means for youth to express themselves. UDL is a research-based teaching and learning framework developed by CAST, a nonprofit education research and development organization. CHEC also translated documents into other languages, as needed.

Further, when behavior issues arose, CHEC educators learned to ask themselves whether a student's behavior was a manifestation of their disability, or something else. CHEC staff began probing deeper to determine if negative behavior was a result of students' needs not being met or a lack of appropriate accommodations and learning modifications at school. Better meeting the needs of students with disabilities tended to reduce negative behavior and encourage a more positive learning environment.

When asked about including special education students in restorative practices, CHEC's ninth grade dean, Daniel Bellido, shared, "At the end of the day what we're focusing on is details and then the things that make us all the same, like universal needs and universal feelings. I would do the same things. I would pull [special education students] maybe with a support. You can ask them, 'Who is someone you feel best supported by or who is someone you would want to have in the mediation that makes you feel comfortable?' You want to meet their needs, right? Because sometimes their needs are a little higher. Maybe they can't communicate. Maybe they need a translator... All of the work is really done in the pre-conference, in the preparation, and figuring out what it is that everybody is going to need, how to set up the space... Are parents going to be involved? If they have dedicated aides, that would be great to make sure

that they are incorporated, and that they are part of it."

Overall, CHEC's efforts in restorative justice and special education came down to implementing an individualized approach. CHEC students needed supports in place to be able to participate and contribute during restorative circles and other practices. CHEC focused on meeting students where they are. It took time, but eventually staff saw students initiating restorative circles with peers without any prompt from adults.

### **Students as Circle Keepers**

At CHEC, students have also gotten engaged in restorative practices in a unique way. By the time the Covid-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, CHEC had already begun engaging its students involved in restorative practices in a way that was building their leadership, communication, and social-emotional skills. Through the school's Community Helpers student group, facilitators meet with students to discuss such topics as empathy, using restorative questions in conflict, mindfulness, and self-awareness.

When the pandemic hit, students could no longer engage in person, so CHEC staff—led by Duvall and in partnership with SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC—trained





students as virtual circle facilitators to give them the skills to connect and engage with their peers in an online environment. By the end of the year, RestorativeDC engaged CHEC virtual circle student facilitators, along with students from E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, to co-host bi-weekly restorative community circles for D.C. youth who were eager to connect with their peers during this isolating time. SchoolTalk piloted this initiative, known as Our City Our Voice, during the pandemic, and then continued the initiative through SY 2021-22, giving D.C. students ongoing opportunities to engage in dialogue and take on leadership roles. According to Ana, a student facilitator in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, “Every time I walk by or see something, I just be like, ‘Let me restore my peace.’ And everyone knows that’s my saying. Sometimes people like to mess with your peace, and all you’ve got to say is, ‘Let me restore my peace,’ and keep it moving. Restorative justice is a way to build community and be peaceful. But sometimes you’ve got to deal with the

ugly. You’ve got to facilitate circles that are ugly... But at the end of the day, it’s always peaceful; it’s always there. I feel like, restorative justice, everybody needs that in their life, you know? It may take forever to open up, but once you get the practice in and you start practicing and practicing, talking to people, being more open, you’re going to have that time to just open up, start running circles, and just restore your peace.”

### Seeding Restorative Leadership Throughout the City

The impact of restorative justice leadership and implementation at CHEC can be felt across the city as staff have taken new positions at other schools. For example, at Sojourner Truth Public Charter School, the founding principal, Denise Edwards, and her founding designer, instructional coach, and teacher, Gabriella Abbondanza, both served as assistant principals at CHEC. After leaving, the two leaders created a new Montessori secondary school with a vision, mission, and philosophy





**“[Restorative justice] has become an overall value... It’s in our handbook, mission statement, part of the orientation, and our meetings with parents. It has helped build student leadership and students’ ability to resolve conflicts.**

*—Maria Tukeva, Principal*

that is restorative in nature. From the beginning, Edwards has intentionally hired individuals who fit the culture she was trying to build. To help train her new staff, she brought in SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC for pre-service training on the fundamentals of restorative justice and restorative approaches to behavior, as well as an ongoing series of circle-keeping workshops that continued throughout the year.

Other leaders throughout the city were exposed to restorative practices while working at CHEC and have brought that lens and mindset to their roles at other public and public charter schools in the District and D.C. Public Schools’ central office.

While there is always more work to be done, Tukeva believes restorative justice has “taken hold” at CHEC. She attributes its success to ongoing training and the

hard work of the staff to make it part of CHEC’s culture. Tukeva says, “It’s in our mission statement. It has become an overall value and we always refer to that. It’s in our handbook, mission statement, part of the orientation, and our meetings with parents.” As a result of this, she continues, “It has helped build student leadership, and students’ ability to resolve conflicts.”

Thanks to dedicated and consistent leadership and commitment, CHEC has become a more welcoming and supportive teaching and learning environment—and the growth continues. ●



# THURGOOD MARSHALL ACADEMY



## **THURGOOD MARSHALL ACADEMY UNWAVERING COMMITMENT TO RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FROM SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

*Justice is at the heart of Thurgood Marshall Academy, D.C.'s first law-themed high school. The school was founded 20 years ago based on the principles of Justice Thurgood Marshall that every child should have a world-class education and the opportunity to reach their full potential. The current executive director believes that true commitment to justice means making sure it is restorative, and he has been leading a schoolwide change effort to ensure that school structures, policies, and practices are equitable and inclusive so that every student feels welcome, supported, and that their voice is heard.*

“We believe that justice is a key component of a healthy community, and practicing justice in our school prepares us to pursue it elsewhere.” This is one of the driving principles for **Thurgood Marshall Academy (TMA)**, a college preparatory public charter high school in Washington, D.C.’s Anacostia Historic District. The school has had a focus on justice since its inception in 2001, when it was founded by a group of law students and attorneys in the D.C. Street Law clinic at Georgetown University Law Center. Throughout its history, the school has implemented a peer court, workshops designed to introduce students to the U.S. legal system, and other programs related to law and justice.

The school began exploring the restorative justice approach in 2015 as a way to reduce school suspensions. TMA was known for its academic rigor, but its no-tolerance discipline policies resulted in a troublingly high suspension rate. School staff recognized that they needed to move away from exclusionary discipline techniques and instead work to build a stronger, more cohesive school community to address student behavior issues. School staff were introduced

to restorative justice principles and practices but found it easy to lose focus on implementation as other issues and priorities arose.

When Raymond Weeden came on board as TMA’s executive director in 2019, he was determined to revitalize the school’s restorative justice efforts. At the time, D.C. schools were working to respond to the D.C. Student Fair Access to School

Act, enacted the prior year. D.C. Council had enacted the new law to decrease the use of out-of-school suspensions and other exclusionary discipline practices. TMA had successfully offered restorative

options for individual discipline incidents, but these initial efforts were often more reactive than proactive approaches, which can change how staff engage and communicate with students to build a positive, respectful school culture. “We couldn’t maintain the climate we had,” says Weeden.

To help others see the impact that punitive discipline policies were having on particular subgroups of students,

**School staff recognized that they needed to move away from exclusionary discipline techniques and instead work to build a stronger, more cohesive school community to address student behavior issues.**

he decided to widely share student discipline data with all groups of the school community, including staff, families, and students. Sharing the data allowed stakeholders to see for themselves that too many students were being suspended and assigned to detention and what that meant for student learning and the school community. This helped others see the urgency for a new approach and develop multi-level buy-in necessary for transformative change.

Weeden was unwavering in his commitment to restorative justice as a priority for the school. “There were no ifs, ands, or buts,” he says. They were going to do things differently; however, this was not a leader issuing a mandate and

then retreating to his office and never getting his hands dirty. It was important that he work alongside staff and other school community members. As a staff member said, “He doesn’t lead from the balcony, he does it from the dance floor. He’s going to do the work too... and implement things with his staff. He’s not just telling them what to do. He’s taking that initiative and getting things done.”

### **More than Just Behavior Response: Start with Culture Change**

Taking advantage of support offered by the D.C. Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE), Weeden brought in SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC to support a Whole School restorative justice approach to





decrease behaviors that led to student suspensions. These efforts focused on community building, social-emotional skill development, conflict resolution, and responsible decision making.

Weeden also wanted to rethink how the school defined itself and began meeting regularly with Yazid Jackson, RestorativeDC's restorative justice program director. Together they talked through how to

have foundational conversations with TMA teachers and staff to build buy-in. Jackson also regularly met with TMA's dean of students early on to support planning for the following year.

It was important to Weeden that the school not limit its focus to merely reducing the number of suspensions and detentions. He wanted the TMA community to examine and rethink all elements of the school climate and culture.

No-excuses-style charter schools are typically characterized as having an intense focus on academics and highly structured discipline systems that rely on a sweat-the-small-stuff approach. In this style, student behavior is closely monitored and students are corrected for minor infractions to hopefully prevent more serious ones. Some schools with

this approach may have a hard time with what they may feel is a loosening of expectations for students. To support this shift at TMA, SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC worked closely with school leadership to

reconsider how TMA might respond to student misbehavior to address underlying issues that cause students to act out and rethink and reframe consequences and accountability. TMA leadership and

staff looked at how they engaged with students and explored how they might both take a more proactive approach to building productive relationships with students and respond in a more supportive and less punitive fashion when students make mistakes.

### **Shift to Virtual Schooling Provided Unexpected Bright Spots for Restorative Practices**

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, just like all schools, TMA had to pivot everything they did to a virtual setting. While challenging, there were some silver linings. Family input and student input on teaching and learning increased dramatically during the period when school was virtual. There was a greater focus on student and staff wellbeing, and staff felt like they had space to implement restorative practices in a

**Weeden wanted the TMA community to examine and rethink all elements of the school climate and culture.**



**“We have found that a lot of this work is about adults learning about themselves and unlearning things.”**

*—Raymond Weeden,  
Executive Director*

less intense environment. And the staff was absolutely ready to try new things to help connect with students learning from home. Often after school, staff engaged in restorative practices with each other; teachers would employ those same strategies in their classes. Weeden commented, “We have found that a lot of this work is about adults learning about themselves and unlearning things. Relationship and community building among the adults—digging into who we are as people, then great things can happen in our classrooms and buildings. There is a lot of work we are in the infancy stages of team building and healing, but being able to take time and step back before giving an immediate consequence has been critical.”

### **Modeling Restorative Practices as a Leader**

As the school leader, Weeden notes that previously, “I would suspend kids

for really simple things like not having enough belt holes or something like that. It took some bad incidents and people calling me out for me to understand... restorative practices helped.” During SY 2020-21, TMA began to do a deep dive into their internal policies and processes, revisiting them to make them equitable and sustainable. Weeden, the school leadership team, and SchoolTalk restorative justice experts combed through the school’s handbook twice, digging into the intent and impact of each policy, practice, process, and system. They asked the key question: Does this policy or practice help our students or help our culture? Once TMA staff could see how their beliefs on respect, authority, and control had led them to cling to certain policies, it was easier to let them go. Weeden sees restorative justice as the cornerstone to building TMA’s school culture, noting, “We’ve tried it the other way, and we know it doesn’t work.”

Weeden also began modeling restorative practices in his interactions with students. Over time, he began to notice a change in how teachers engaged and communicated with students. He observed teachers having more regular check-ins with students and taking the time to help students work through their feelings. This shift has had an impact on the school's discipline data. A 2022 OSSE analysis highlighted TMA as a school that saw consistent decreases in a number of key disciplinary actions over the period they were implementing restorative practices and receiving Whole School intervention support from RestorativeDC.

At the end of the day, the school doesn't need to make restorative justice a stand-alone initiative. Restorative justice has become part of the school's overall social justice approach and how it thinks about equity. Looking forward, Weeden hopes to train more staff and teachers in restorative justice practices and for students to be engaged and able to self-regulate and de-escalate. And most of all, he hopes TMA students will be happy to be at school. ●





# WASHINGTON YU YING



## **WASHINGTON YU YING PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL A STORY OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN TWO LANGUAGES**

*Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School, an elementary school in northeast D.C., cultivates a learning environment where teachers and students work together positively, supportively, and respectfully. On any given day, you can find students organized into small “lunch bunch” groups designed to help students make connections. Teachers regularly use restorative practices in classrooms to encourage students to express their feelings, discuss challenges, and build community. But in this school, students are learning how to talk about their emotions and engage collaboratively, not just in English, the language spoken by most of the students at home, but in Mandarin Chinese as well.*



**Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School** was founded in 2008 by a small group of parents who wanted to establish a world-class Chinese immersion school designed to develop young people’s intellectual, personal, emotional, and social skills. Yu Ying’s mission is to inspire young people to create a better world by challenging them to reach their full potential in a nurturing Chinese/English educational environment. Students receive equal instruction in Mandarin Chinese and English in all core subjects to gain a deeper understanding of content in both languages. During the 2021–22 school year, the school served approximately 570 students in Pre–K through fifth grade. Students in Pre–K are fully immersed in Chinese instruction five days a week, while students in kindergarten through fifth grade learn all subjects in both Chinese and English.



Yu Ying has been recognized for its academic success. In 2013, the school went through a rigorous process to be recognized as an International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme World School—one of only eight such schools in D.C. Yu Ying has repeatedly been given the top rating by the D.C. Public Charter School Board as part of the oversight body’s annual school performance framework.

Despite these accomplishments, the school was concerned about potential disparities in disciplinary actions at the school. During the 2015–16 school year, Yu Ying decided to take a critical look at its discipline data over a number of years to identify potential patterns in who was being removed from classrooms most frequently and why. School administrators recognized that the practice of sending students out of the classroom for behavior did not align with the school’s vision of creating a strong community of learners who are confident in their language abilities and have intercultural understanding and respect. As Sarah Harris, assistant principal, and Stephanie James, learning support coordinator, reflected, “We were unhappy with the data of who was being sent to the office and who was being punished—overwhelmingly African American males—and therefore we wanted to make a shift.” They began exploring the restorative justice approach as a way to address these concerns.

## Generating Buy-In for Restorative Practices Among Administrators & Teaching Staff

While the philosophy of restorative justice aligns well with the mission and culture of the school, school leaders knew that they would need key staff on board to implement a schoolwide restorative approach. In June 2019, SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC was offering a two-week summer intensive workshop on implementing restorative justice to support positive school climate and culture and respond constructively to student behavior. YuYing sent a team of administrative staff and teachers to participate in the training with the goal of having them bring back what they learned to share with their colleagues

**“Having the opportunities to build relationships... helped teachers be on board with seeing how restorative practices would impact their students, because it was starting to positively impact our own relationships with each other.”**

*—Jayme Shores-Gubartalla,  
Learning Support Teacher*

As a member of the team who attended the summer intensive workshop, learning support teacher Jayme Shores-Gubartalla recalled that, “I had a few opportunities where I had a chance to lead professional development by sharing what I learned from RestorativeDC. I also had experience in the past with restorative practices. I brought back some very simple activities to help us get to know each other. I think having the opportunities to build relationships through different activities really, really helped teachers be on board with seeing how restorative practices would impact their students, because it was starting to positively impact our own relationships with each other.”

## Establishing Structures to Facilitate & Sustain Restorative Justice

Three years later, restorative practices have become part of the fabric of Yu Ying's school culture and operations. School leaders attribute this to a three-pronged approach:

1. They focused on the long-term sustainability of the restorative approach right from the start.
2. They worked to ensure that restorative practices could be practically applied within a language-immersion environment.
3. They created a dedicated position to support students and staff in restorative practices.



## Sustainability

Yu Ying intentionally put in place structures needed to make the work of implementing restorative justice manageable and sustainable. According to Shores-Gubartalla, “At the beginning of our initiative to implement restorative practices, many teachers weren’t on board with the plan of having meetings

would manage staffing for each grade level to allow teachers to step out of the classrooms to have the restorative meetings. Once they were able to demonstrate how they could provide time, space, and staffing to allow for the use of these restorative approaches on a regular basis, more teachers got involved and were open to being a part of the process.



and mediations using restorative practices. Teachers were apprehensive that it would take extra time or would be too exhausting to try to make sure the meetings were happening and ensure the right people were available to facilitate the meeting.” While getting started may have been a little hard, they did deliberate planning as a team to figure out how they

Shores-Gubartalla shares, “I think that one of the mindset shifts that we’ve had to do among the staff is to make sure that we made a plan that was sustainable.”

## Effective in a Language-Immersion Environment

Implementing restorative practices in a second language requires additional

considerations. But as part of the work to ensure restorative practices became the norm, the school needed to ensure that implementing restorative practices was feasible in their language-immersion setting. For example, teachers would need to regularly facilitate morning meetings—a key restorative practice for proactive community building and developing student voice—in both Mandarin Chinese and English. This meant not just ensuring teachers were trained in restorative practices but that the school needed to develop resources in both languages and

provide dedicated time for teams to work together on things like morning meeting topics that fit the language skills of their students. Harris shared, “It’s not the same as in an English classroom where we could throw out a pretty complex question even to third graders, and with a little bit of scaffolding, they’re right on board with us. In the Chinese classroom, they really have to think about the language that the students have to be able to access that question.”

Yu Ying teacher Aini Fang explains, “I felt a little bit nervous because the professional development I received is for teachers to do [restorative] circles in

students’ first language. However, I have to hold the circle in students’ second language, which is Chinese. I felt lost because I was very concerned about the students learning the Chinese language. I knew that some students didn’t have the language to fully express what they think about a certain topic. So we researched;

we talked to different colleagues and read restorative justice books to find more resources, and we were risk takers. Just to start doing that... to start doing the circles, we did face some challenges, but as we reflect we are constantly adding more resources in Chinese for the

students to be able to fully express their stories, their feelings in their second languages.”

Teachers found that students might have the words in English to express more complex feelings but they have very limited vocabulary to express emotions in Chinese. Fang remarked, “They might only know, for example, words like happy, sad, and excited, so we made charts where we can list all of the emotions they might experience. We added Pinyin, the phonetic system for Chinese, so they are able to pronounce the words.” Teachers also began relying on visual supports—rather than solely

**“We researched, we talked to different colleagues, and read restorative justice books to find more resources, and we were risk takers.”**

*—Aini Fang, Teacher*

on words—to help expand students’ vocabulary in both languages. Students are able to see the pictures and choose the one that suits them best for the day. With the regular habit of circles, students have improved their grasp of the language and are better able to express their emotions in Chinese.

Fang shares the following example: “In morning circles, we shared what words might hurt you when you hear them. The students shared, ‘I get really upset when kids call me fat,’ or, ‘I get really upset when other people harass me.’ These are concerns that they think about, but I didn’t really know that until we shared that topic. Students have participated in circles for many years, and now I think the kids feel safe to be honest and share what they really feel.”

Another strategy for strengthening practices is that circles take place in both the English and Chinese class blocks, and colleagues who teach the same students work together to ensure that the routines are the same for both English and Chinese classes so that students do not get confused. They teach the same skills so that students can express their emotions in both languages, allowing them to fully participate in restorative experiences in both settings. Libby, a fifth grade student says, “Morning meetings help me get together with my friends a little bit because we get to share with each other and sometimes

we’ll do it in Chinese so that we can practice talking to one another. My favorite part of the morning meeting is probably in Chinese. My teacher writes our class sentence and the date, and then has us read it. Sometimes she has us read it backward and it’s really fun because it gets my brain moving so that I am not half asleep.”

The school has found that the experiences have really benefited both teachers and students. As Harris sums it up, “One of the most powerful outcomes was to have some of our Chinese teachers really embrace the process and have them lead the way with their colleagues and share their experiences at the next training that we did.”



**“There are some students who may not have had the opportunity to speak up for themselves, or to take that turn, or have the agency to speak if they want to.”**

*—Stephanie James,  
Learning Support Coordinator*

### **Staffing to Support Restorative Practices**

Leaders worked to embed restorative practices in school culture through the creation of a staff support position that connects staff and teachers with students through restorative practices. Phillip Mullins describes his role as a student liaison for grades 2–5, “As the student liaison, I speak up for the students. I give them advocacy. If they have any issues that they feel like they can’t go directly to their teacher about, I come to intervene and give them the bridge. I bridge the gap between the teacher and student. Sometimes students may have an issue going on at home, and they may want to talk with me about something going on at home. I also help bridge the gap between student and parent. I also help bridge the gap between parent and teacher. Sometimes as a parent or a teacher may have an issue going on via email and I help with bridge that gap as well.”

Mullins facilitates restorative community-building circles called “lunch bunches,”

which support students who benefit from smaller groups to build relationships, improve social-emotional skills, and process peer interactions. Lunch bunches allow for more relaxed social time with a smaller number of peers versus being in the whole-class environment. Mullins found that lunch bunches have been instrumental in helping students transition back to in-person learning. He explains, “While on Zoom and at home, students were able to do whatever they wanted in their own home and had a lot of freedom. When they’re at school, it’s a whole new level of freedom with their friends. They sometimes forget what it means to be in school, what it means to be outside of their own comfort zone, and how to be in a shared comfort zone and be able to respect that shared comfort zone.”

The lunch bunches have been so successful in building relationships with students that now teachers are requesting to run lunch groups themselves. For example, one grade-level team saw the need for this with a particular group of



students, and set up a series of lunch groups for teachers and students to get to know each other better, build stronger relationships, and discover common interests.

### **The Impact of Restorative Practices**

Yu Ying staff can point to a number of changes in the school since the introduction of restorative practices training and implementation in 2019. They describe the school as a much more inclusive community that feels safe for students.



As Yu Ying's learning support coordinator, Stephanie James, shares, "There are some students who may not have had the opportunity to speak up for themselves, or to take that turn, or have the agency to speak if they want to. In the morning meetings, they have the right to participate if they want to or not. If they want to pass, it's their right to say, "No, not right now," but if they actually want to give input and speak upon whatever the topic is, it's their time. And for some students that might not happen every day for them. So for them to participate in a circle and to feel heard, and to feel understood, and to feel listened to when it's their time, that definitely has promoted agency and equity."

The school has found that this has particular power in giving students with special needs the opportunity to be heard and seen. For example, students with speech and language impairments may not want to talk because they may feel embarrassed about how they sound when they articulate a word and it doesn't sound right. James adds, "But when you have a restorative or a morning circle, you have that talking piece, and it's your turn to talk, and it's your turn for everyone to listen to you, even if you're going to take however long you're going to take. Everyone is paying attention to you and you have that opportunity to speak up for yourself, as opposed to feeling shy or intimidated when there's a large group."

Restorative circles are a more proactive approach to building community, in this case to resolve incidents of harm. As James points out, "Before we utilized restorative practices, if there was harm done, the adult is talking to one student and then talking to the other student, and stating, 'Okay, we'll solve it this way.' With restorative circles, now we have the space, opportunity, and structure to say, 'Okay, you get to speak on your part on what harm was done to you.' The other student who did the harming is presented with the same opportunity. The guidance and the structure behind the restorative process gives students more ownership and a safe space so they can understand, 'Okay, I'm being heard; I'm being listened to.'"

The staff recognize there has been a mindset shift and feel a shared responsibility to support student academic and social-emotional success in the classroom.

The impact of this work is evident when the school looks at their discipline-related data. As Harris reflects, “There was a period of time where we would have a number of students downstairs in the front office, or outside our offices, waiting to be seen by an administrator because there was harm done in the classroom or they just needed that additional support. But once we implemented restorative justice in classrooms, the numbers of students that came down to the office definitely decreased.” While there had been over 280 office referrals between 2012 and 2014, by the 2021–22 school year the practice of sending students to the office had essentially stopped, except in the most extreme situations.



School leaders note that Yu Ying staff feel more empowered after participating in SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC trainings and get more experience using restorative practices in the classroom. In some cases, staff members and teachers use a restorative process to deal with interpersonal and group conflict. Shores-Gubartalla describes a misunderstanding between a few staff members. One of them came to her for advice saying, “I know that you spend a lot of time doing this restorative practice, how might I go about trying this with my team member?” She talked through the situation and encouraged the staff member to use the restorative questions and statements that they used with students and to have an open and honest discussion with that team member. After a few months of talking it through, the team members came back together and were able to have a restorative conversation, and move on to continue to have a positive relationship. Shores-Gubartalla notes that, “There had to have been trust among staff. It’s really important for us to have that trust, to be able to continue to have success stories.”

“I have to give SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC a shout out,” continues Shores-Gubartalla. “They have come to our school and created small circles where we’ve had a chance to share with each other about what’s going on. I do really believe those have been helpful. I feel it’s helpful when it’s led by someone outside of the school, because we get to

take a step back from leading something and be a participant. I feel grateful that we can be supported as a whole staff.”

Mullins has found ways to connect the restorative practices he uses at school to his home life. “My work feels more family oriented. I am a dad, and so I can understand the restorative practices that I feel I use in my own home when I sit down and hash out why my four-year-old is working my wife’s nerves. It’s helpful to understand that this is the same type of dynamic that the teachers see in their own students. They have this immense amount of love and patience for students who can still be challenging. It makes me want to do the work in a different way.”

### Lessons for Other Schools

For schools considering or in the process of implementing restorative justice, Shores-Gubartalla recommends not to try to do everything at once. “You can start small with a few practices and grow over time. Sometimes when we start a new program or we start new practices, we think we have to do it all right from the beginning. But from our experience, we’ve tried small steps along the way and once we felt successful with one part, then we added a new part. And I think that that is really helpful when starting anything new. I would also say that sometimes you might have a bad month or a bad few months, but it doesn’t mean that you can’t come back and try again and then continue to grow and get stronger again. We felt that way

during virtual learning, we felt we had made all this progress, and then we went to virtual learning and how do we do it now? We didn’t have all the different things that we had in place during in-person learning. But now we’re back at it again, and it feels great. But it didn’t feel good for a while,” says Shores-Gubartalla.

Harris also adds, “A key ingredient is having that open mind to know that there is a need for change and being willing and accepting to the process, because it is a process. Being patient, having empathy, understanding that everyone is human and everyone needs to be heard. Be patient with yourself as an administrator or as a classroom teacher, because you are always going to second guess yourself... Are we doing this correctly? Is this the right program that we should have implemented? Be patient in working through the process.” She also recommends that schools take time to celebrate progress: “Celebrate! It is important to have a moment of looking back at where you were and where you are now, and really celebrating that.” ●

**“A key ingredient is having that open mind to know that there is a need for change and being willing and accepting to the process, because it is a process.”**

*—Jayme Shores-Gubartalla,  
Learning Support Teacher*

## About SchoolTalk

### Vision

School communities where every youth is honored and self-determined.

### Mission

We tackle critical and complex problems that impact marginalized youth and the schools and systems that support them.

### Background

Founded in 2008, SchoolTalk, Inc. is a District of Columbia-based nonprofit that supports the D.C. education community in collaboratively addressing complex challenges and creating practical solutions for assisting youth of all abilities to achieve success. SchoolTalk's programs actively work to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth through both proactive initiatives—such as youth leadership and mentoring, skill-building, and workforce development—and direct intervention to resolve issues in productive ways, such as mediation and restorative justice. SchoolTalk has two key program areas: inclusive education and restorative justice.



## About RestorativeDC

SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC provided intensive, collaborative technical support to the three schools featured in these profiles, schools that have made a long-term commitment to integrating restorative justice into their overall philosophy and school culture.



Since 2015, RestorativeDC has introduced and supported restorative practices in 86 public and public charter schools in the District of Columbia and beyond to help foster positive, more inclusive school climates, while mitigating educational inequities and promoting school safety.

RestorativeDC provides support to schools through its Whole School model, and through targeted technical assistance to schools that may not be ready to embark on a Whole School effort. In both cases, RestorativeDC's approach is two pronged: growing the individual capacity of youth-serving professionals and enhancing the organizational capacity of schools and supporting organizations. This is provided through consultation with school staff, one-on-one and small group coaching and modeling, training for schools and individuals, capacity building, and training efforts tailored to individual schools' needs and unique contexts. Learn more at [www.schooltalkdc.org/restoratedc](http://www.schooltalkdc.org/restoratedc).





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