

A school's "peace room" aims to end fighting in the halls

By McClatchy-Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.13.13

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Geneva Harris, a senior at Fenger High School in Chicago, Illinois, leads a Peer Jury Training session where students learn to help diffuse arguments on May 7, 2013. Heather Charles/Chicago Tribune/MCT

CHICAGO — The tension between the two Manley High School students started on Facebook, with a wall post that asked a direct, but loaded, question.

“Do you have a problem with me?” one teenager wrote on the other’s page.

By the time Marquita Riley, 16, and Aaliyah Hudson, 17, ended up in their school’s “peace room,” rumors had floated through the halls that the two girls were going to brawl.

Hoping to defuse the conflict and avoid a fight that could lead to a 10-day suspension, Aaliyah retreated to the room, a bright classroom with a comfy couch, chairs and posters, to get a counselor to mediate.

There, the girls sat in a circle of chairs, talked and listened to each other until they worked out their problems.

“I came down here and talked before I reacted,” Aaliyah said after their session. “That way, ’cause if anything did happen, it wouldn’t be my bad. I’d be at fault, but I came down and warned them,” she said.

Talking And Listening, Not Fighting

The peace room at Manley is a part of the school's restorative justice initiative, a growing social movement that, among other things, focuses on healing and teaching how to resolve conflicts. The philosophy aims to bring together victims and perpetrators to cooperatively work through their problems.

The concept is increasingly being used in schools, community centers and churches in Chicago as a way to teach young people how to dissect their anger. They learn to confront tension before it turns violent. It is also being used as an alternative to punitive measures, like suspensions and arrests, which can lead to more trouble for hurting communities.

The idea is that "when harm happens or someone misbehaves, there needs to be a process of restoration in order for the community to move forward," said Ilana Zafran of Umoja Student Development. Umoja runs restorative justice programs in Chicago schools.

City authorities are grappling with shootings and killings among youths. Activists, ministers and educators are turning to restorative justice to thwart the unrest. They say the approach defuses violence by instilling a value system and culture that eventually shows positive effects.

The concept forces all sides in a disagreement to communicate and understand one another instead of resorting to violence. There may still be punishment for wrongdoing, but restorative justice emphasizes identifying hurt and thinking of ways to fix it.

"The assumption is if you are a teenager, you know everything about how to act and behave," Zafran said. "But that's not true. This idea of restoration is not something even adults do well because it can be messy and complicated and involves vulnerability, and that is just hard."

Worth A Try To Prevent Violence

But while the principles of restorative justice are theoretically ideal, supporters admit that they are complicated to enact. It is also difficult to measure the success of such work.

Still, restorative justice is a tactic worth trying, experts say.

"The idea that if we punish hard enough they won't do it again hasn't proven effective," said the Rev. David Kelly. His ministry applies the philosophy when working with troubled youths. "Ultimately we're putting so much money into incarceration and it's a failing system that is costly."

At Manley High and Fenger Academy in Chicago, administrators have created peace rooms where students and workers can retreat to work out problems.

In the peace circles, people involved in a conflict sit together and are allowed to express their feelings without interruption.

"This process forces us to look at a conflict and then look at what goes on behind it," said Tosha Jackson, assistant principal at Fenger.

That school began a restorative justice program during its turnaround after a 2009 brawl left one student dead.

In the peace rooms, students often reveal gang ties and deep troubles they may have at home. Teachers admit they have unresolved hurt and anger, and staff members admit they struggle, too.

"A lot of our kids don't want to be involved in fights. They don't want to be suspended or away from school," Jackson said. "We had to create an environment of peace. High school has to be a pleasurable experience for our kids. If they come here and feel the same anxiety they feel in the streets, how can we expect them to stay?"

"Now I'm A People Person"

Before she started high school, Geneva Harris, 18, said she was the type of kid who called others names, gave cutting responses and oozed sassy attitude. But at Fenger, another student questioned the motivation behind her demeanor.

Harris, a senior, learned from that student the steps for breaking through tension. Then she became a peer conflict resolver herself. Now, she's quick to pull her friends and family members into a circle and talk their problems over.

"Now I'm a people person," she said. "I'm like the older sister among my friends."

At Manley, restorative justice was started to address the school's high suspension rate, said Ted Christians, CEO of Umoja. Eventually the suspension rate dropped by 40 percent and the number of on-site arrests fell. So it became a way of teaching social skills and moral lessons.

On a recent afternoon, the Manley High School peace room pulsated with activity.

Among the people there were Marquita and Aaliyah, the two girls rumored to be gearing up for a major fight.

"People came up to me and said you wanted to fight me," Marquita, a sophomore, told Aaliyah.

"If you thought I had a problem with you, you could have come to talk to me," Aaliyah told Marquita.

After another 20 minutes of discussion, they agreed they had simply misunderstood each other. The girls decided they would not fight, and promised they would talk it over if they found themselves facing tension again.

Quiz

- 1 What was the primary conflict between Marquita Riley and Aaliyah Hudson?
 - (A) boyfriend issues
 - (B) physical violence
 - (C) student rumors
 - (D) Facebook posts

- 2 All of the following are goals of the restorative justice program EXCEPT?
 - (A) a peaceful school environment
 - (B) a decrease in shootings and killings
 - (C) better grades for Manley students
 - (D) better communication among youth

- 3 Select the paragraph from the article that BEST shows the urgency of the need for a restorative justice program for the entire community in "Talking and Listening, Not Fighting".

- 4 In "Now I'm A People Person," the article provides evidence that the restorative justice program is having a positive effect by
 - (A) making several comparisons
 - (B) asking a rhetorical question
 - (C) stating an opponent's view
 - (D) telling several anecdotes.

Answer Key

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- Paragraph 9:**
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