

A pilot project in Framingham, MA

This year we started a unique project in Framingham, MA. Engaging Schools is training administrators, counselors, and teacher-leaders from Fuller Middle School in how to create a restorative culture, and we're doing it under the sponsorship of the teachers' union.

Responding to an uptick in fights and violence in the school and a desire to shift to discipline policies rooted in restorative practices, the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) secured a grant from its parent organization, the National Education Association, to bring Engaging Schools in. The MTA considers this a pilot project that they hope to replicate in other schools.



This year we're helping an 18-person leadership team review their Student-Family Handbook and learn how to facilitate restorative circles as a process for addressing discipline issues. We will expand the training to all teachers next year.

As the *Metro West Daily News* reported, the program emphasizes dialogue and reconciliation rather than punishment, seizing upon disciplinary trouble as opportunities to do what schools do best: teach. "It really is a different way of thinking about how we come together in a community school, where it is not about compliance and punishment, but it's really about how to listen, talk, share and come to understand each other," said Barbara Madeloni, president of the MTA.



Principal Jose Duarte and student Kalaiyah Kelly
Photo courtesy MetroWest Daily News

Circles bring together students, staff, and sometimes parents to help everybody understand the impact of their actions. "Each member of the circle gets to tell each other how they felt and how it impacted them. We come to a conclusion, an agreement, about how were going to move forward," Principal Jose Duarte said. "And then we're going to hold each other accountable."

The *Daily News* reported that "after William LeRouge had a fight with a classmate, the seventh-grader was ready for round two. Instead, the students sat in a circle and talked it out." When student Kalaiyah Kelly participated in a circle discussion, she appreciated being able to tell her side of the story. She felt supported. "I felt like we all could state our opinions ... I had some people on my side," Kelly said. "Usually they would just be like, oh, you did this wrong, this wrong, now you gotta go to the office."

Principal Duarte says that the school will use other forms of discipline as warranted, but that the goal is to greatly reduce suspensions and other punishment.

(Over, please)

Our board of directors includes many educators with deep experience as practitioners and researchers. One is Jenny Nagaoka, who – along with co-author John Gomperts of America's Promise Alliance – recently published a commentary in *Education Week* citing ways to help more students finish high school. Jenny is the Deputy Director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

Here are ways that the research suggests districts can help more students complete twelfth grade, and examples of how Engaging Schools is helping to achieve this goal, especially in underserved schools.

- **Focus on success for ninth graders.** “The habits students set as freshmen have an impact on their path to completing high school and their future beyond graduation. ... Ninth graders who are ‘on-track’ ... are four times more likely to graduate than students who are off-track.” Engaging Schools is working with schools from New York City to Anchorage to create structures such as ninth grade teams and Freshman Houses to provide extra student support and boost ninth grade success.



Photo courtesy Syracuse City School District

- **Foster supportive relationships.** The transition from the middle grades to high school is often stressful. As the authors say, “a dramatic drop in grades, attendance, and academic behavior is a common warning sign of this strain. In high school, it’s easier to skip class and harder to figure out how to get help. But high school doesn’t have to be impersonal.” Engaging Schools helps schools add programs such as advisory to ensure that at least one adult in the school will know each student well over the course of every year and make sure his or her needs (and strengths) are addressed.

- **Assess and refine disciplinary practices.** “Out-of-school suspensions mean students lose class time, which can place them at greater risk of falling farther behind. When schools understand which of their students receive suspensions, they can develop targeted interventions for individual students and help keep them on track to graduate.” Engaging Schools is a national leader in helping hundreds of schools design disciplinary systems built on a foundation of restorative practices and student support which reduces lost instructional days and increases equity. Our recent publication, *Shifting Gears: Recalibrating Schoolwide Discipline and Student Support* provides a step-by-step approach for creating equitable, supportive school climates. We have distributed nearly 1,000 copies to school leaders to help them plan for systemic change.

All of the above help build student engagement, and engaged students have a more positive high school experience and greater academic success, including school completion.