



## Improving School Climate as a Benefit to All: A Case Study

### Bridgeport Public Schools' Discipline Climate

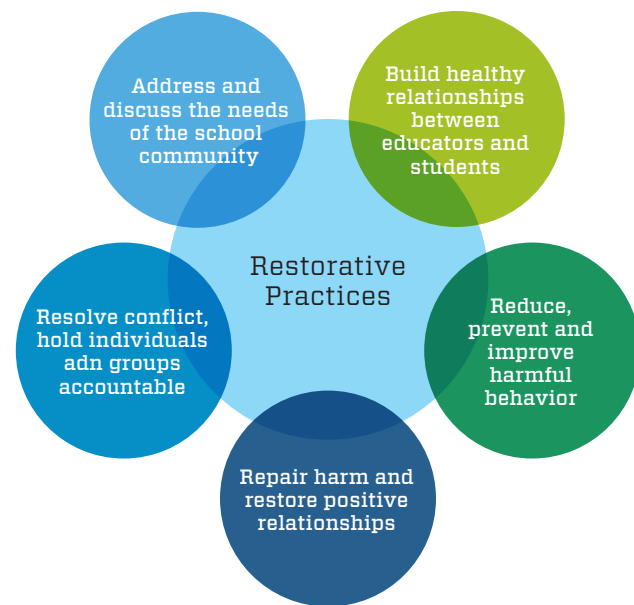
During the 2009-10 school year, the Bridgeport Public School (BPS) District issued over 6,000 out-of-school suspensions (OSS).<sup>1</sup> Nearly a decade later in 2017, the number of OSS have decreased 47%. Although suspensions are often the most widely utilized strategies for addressing misconduct, extensive research finds suspensions rarely solve misconduct incidents nor effectively address situations leading up to suspension.<sup>2</sup> OSS in particular has been linked to low academic achievement and has been argued to contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, even amidst ongoing budgetary struggles, the BPS District has sought to combat antiquated methods of discipline with the advent of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).



In contrast to methods aimed at solving one or two issues at a time, “SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.”<sup>4</sup>

In the fall of 2013, BPS brought a targeted focus of SEL and a vision of reducing and eventually eliminating OSS to the BPS District. Through incorporating SEL in the BPS District, educators place equal importance on fostering emotionally healthy students prepared to engage in positive interpersonal relationships and ethical decision making as they do academic goals and outcomes for students. As BPS kicks off their fourth year of this district and community-wide SEL initiative with improving school climate in mind, BPS aims to continue showing improvement in chronic absenteeism (see Figure 5) and lowering suspension rates (Figures 2-4) through SEL and SEL practices such as the RULER (Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions) Approach and Restorative Practices.

**Figure 1.** Core SEL Competencies. Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2017.



**Figure 2.** Core Restorative Practices Competencies. Source: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools. 2014.

Based on a philosophy intended to shift discipline responses and school environments from punitive to restorative, Restorative Practices consists of methods and interventions that work to prevent harm and conflict by creating a sense of belonging, safety, and social responsibility within the school community.

Through a partnership between BPS leadership, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (YCEI) and The Consultation Center at Yale, the RULER Approach expanded its footprint from one school, Wilbur Cross Elementary School, to the entirety of the district in an effort to direct greater attention to SEL. With BPS leadership, guidance from Yale partners, and the Bridgeport community's need for an integrated approach to improving school climate, the BPS District asked BCAC to spearhead the OSS Pilot Task Force. The task force was and continues to be focused on reducing and potentially eliminating OSS along with taking a more intensive approach to ensuring socially and emotionally healthy schools.

When schools and classrooms emulate the type of positivity and encouragement that makes up SEL, students are more likely to get their social and emotional needs met and in turn, flourish in the classroom and society.<sup>5</sup>

### Collaborative Process

Throughout the OSS Pilot Task Force's 18-month long process of providing resources, supports, and monthly data monitoring to the four pilot Bridgeport public schools, several challenges and solutions presented themselves along the way.

### Data Collection

Accurate and inclusive data collection was a significant piece to measuring the association of SEL practices on types of discipline sanctions and frequency. Challenges presented themselves on coming to a consensus on which measures would be the most beneficial to review monthly and what was in each pilot school's capacity to report on. The following discipline indicators were identified: overall OSS and in-school suspensions (ISS), OSS/ISS by race and ethnicity, OSS/ISS by incident, and chronic absenteeism. In addition, a representative from each pilot school provided monthly qualitative information alongside the monthly indicator statistics.

### Leadership, School Staff, and Community Buy-in

In order to ensure pilot school success, all SEL initiatives, resources, and supports had to have buy-in from school administration and staff with clear and committed leadership assurance from the top. With an explicit vision from the BPS Superintendent and affirmative consent from each of the pilot school principals, the OSS Pilot Task Force worked to illicit buy-in from pilot school staff and administration. To accomplish this, each pilot school sent teachers, staff, and school security to Bridgeport-curated trainings in Basic School Climate, Restorative

Practices, and Advanced School Climate. Individual "champions" were chosen amongst themselves to promote Restorative Practices and SEL in their respective schools. SEL and Restorative Practices were also added to the focus of each pilot school's already established RULER Approach teams, consisting of teachers and staff tasked with continuous quality integration. This was a critical component to successful SEL interventions and achieving OSS pilot school objectives. Commitment and buy-in from all teachers, staff, and administration continues to be necessary for SEL sustainability. Pilot school objectives can be achieved when teachers, staff, and administration believe these methods work together.

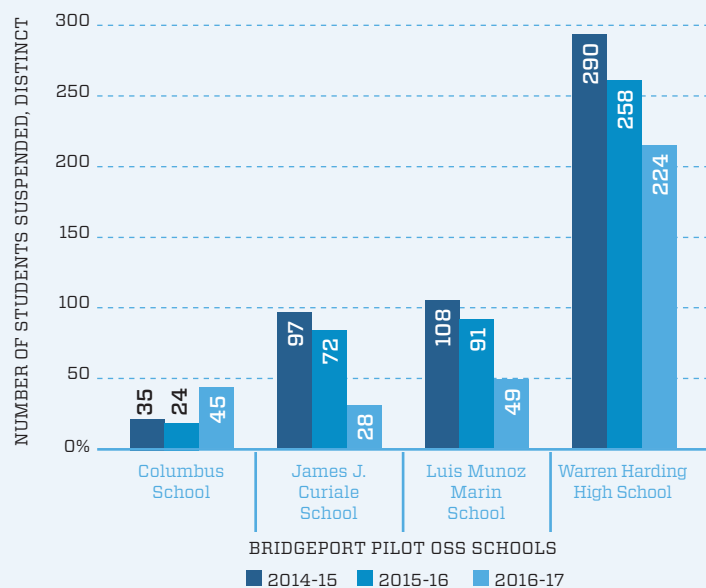
After buy-in from schools was established, the OSS Pilot Task Force immediately went to work on garnering community and parental support. This task was just as significant, in not more so, as acquiring concurrence from leadership and school staff. A truly social and emotionally intelligent environment incorporates students' community surroundings and home environment. Community and parental support was accomplished by introducing SEL and SEL practices at an annual Parent Convention where BPS parents and community members were invited to learn about new initiatives and various work being done in the schools. Efforts to obtain community buy-in involved offering numerous RULER and Restorative Practices trainings to nonprofits, faith-based groups, community leaders, and others impacted by this work. Without reaching out to these groups and crafting a collaborative community, targeted outcomes and objectives would not have been achieved as they have been at the time of this brief.

### Bucking the Trend - Reducing Suspensions Through SEL

The goals of implementing the RULER Approach and Restorative Practices as SEL school climate interventions are six-fold: increase academic achievement and growth, increase emotional understanding and self-regulation, improve school climate, reduce absenteeism, reduce suspensions and expulsions, and improve interpersonal relationships between students, school staff, and the community overall.

With careful consideration in 2015, the OSS Pilot Task Force chose four BPS schools, consisting of three elementary schools and one high school, to test out the application of both the RULER Approach and Restorative Practices. These four schools, Columbus, Curiale, Marin, and Harding, met monthly to discuss successes and problems of practice. Since the RULER Approach was applied in each BPS since 2013, a heavy focus was placed on structurally implementing Restorative Practices into each of these four pilot schools.

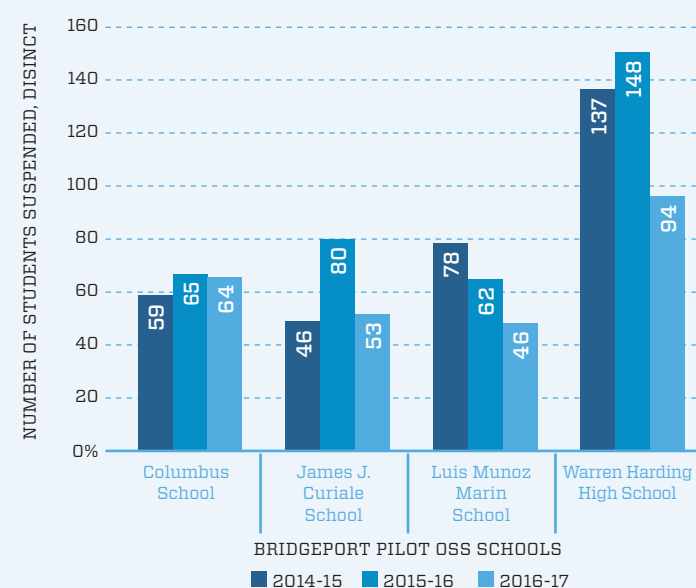
Figures 3-5 illustrate key discipline outcomes of each pilot school before and after SEL practice integration and data monitoring.



**Figure 3.** Distinct\* Out-of-School Suspensions, 2014-2017

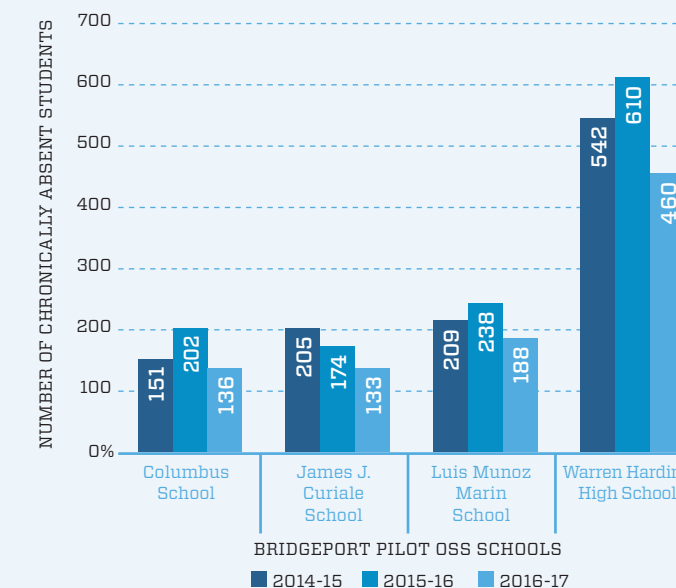
\* *Distinct* means the number of individual students suspended. Students are counted only once regardless of the number of suspensions they accrue. All statistics presented are distinct unless stated otherwise.

From 2014-15 to 2016-17, OSS rates within the four pilot schools have decreased 34.7%, collectively. Overall BPS distinct OSS rates from 2014-15 to 2016-17 only decreased 17.7%.



**Figure 4.** Distinct In-School Suspensions, 2014-17

As OSS decreases, ISS typically tends to increase. From 2014-15 to 2016-17, distinct ISS across BPS rose 3.4%. However, when we look at the four pilot schools who were given supplemental resources, supports, Restorative Practices trainings, and monthly data monitoring and evaluation by the OSS Pilot Task Force, ISS accumulatively decreased by 19.6% (2014-15 to 2016-17).



**Figure 5.** Chronic Absenteeism\*, 2014-2017

\* *Chronically absent status* means a student was absent more than 10% of the school year.

In addition, chronic absenteeism has declined significantly within the four pilot schools. From 2014-15 to 2016-17, chronic absenteeism in the pilot schools have seen a total decrease of 17%. BPS overall only recorded a 1% decrease from 2014-15 to 2016-17.



**“Education must shift from a purely academic focus to a whole child approach in which not only cognitive, but also physical, social, emotional, and civic learning and health is targeted and developed.”**

*- Sean Slade, ASCD, The Whole Child*



## Fostering a Culture Shift

Implementing effective social and emotional learning practices with fidelity requires a multi-tiered and multi-year process. Transforming a traditional school environment into a social, emotional, and restorative one calls for SEL integration at all levels of school functioning (curriculum and instruction, school-wide practices and policies, and family and community partnerships). Most especially, because we know it takes time, relationship building and a conscientious effort to sustainability are critical components.

## Moving Forward

The Bridgeport Public School District is one of many districts around the country acting on the importance of producing socially and emotionally resilient students as well as academically prepared ones. After five years, even with Bridgeport pilot schools showing a 45.8% reduction in OSS and a 74.6% decrease in ISS, the BPS District and the Bridgeport community are far from finished in this work.

With the onset of the 2017-18 school year, the BPS District is actively pursuing the expansion of Restorative Practices and a more intensive SEL focus to all Bridgeport public schools. With a commitment to investing in social and emotional intelligence through the RULER Approach and Restorative Practices, the BPS District and the overall Bridgeport community will continue to invest in more resources, supports, and continuous quality improvement efforts.

## Further Reading

LOST CLASS TIME: Redefining School Discipline and Improving School Climate in Bridgeport, Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition. <http://bit.ly/1TQfKQi>.

Social and Emotional Learning in the Bridgeport Public Schools, An Initial Report to the Community, Meyer J., M.A.T., & Strambler, M. [http://www.bridgeportedu.net/News/2016-2017/BPS\\_Report\\_281651\\_1095\\_5.pdf](http://www.bridgeportedu.net/News/2016-2017/BPS_Report_281651_1095_5.pdf).

Social emotional learning reduces suspensions and makes schools safer, Blanchard, A., Healy, M.P. <http://bit.ly/2v1DgY8>.

The Interaction Effects of Program Training, Dosage, and Implementation Quality on Targeted Student Outcomes for the RULER Approach to Social and Emotional Learning, Reyes, M. R., Brackett, M. A., Rivers S. E., Elbertson N. A., Salovey, P. <http://bit.ly/2iEHBM3>.

*In partnership with:*



*With support from:*



## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Data from EdSight, Connecticut State Department of Education, <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>.

<sup>2</sup> Owen, J.W. (2013). USING ALTERNATIVES TO SCHOOL SUSPENSION CAN IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS AND COMMUNITY SAFETY. Scholars Strategy Network, <http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/using-alternatives-school-suspension-can-improve-student-success-and-community-safety>.

<sup>3</sup> Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The Impact of Enhancing Students' Social and Emotional Learning: A Meta-Analysis of School-Based Universal Interventions. The Society for Research in Child Development, Incorporated, [https://law.duke.edu/childedlaw/schooldiscipline/downloads/instead\\_of\\_suspension.pdf](https://law.duke.edu/childedlaw/schooldiscipline/downloads/instead_of_suspension.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> What is SEL? CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>.

<sup>5</sup> Owen, J., Wettach, J., & Hoffman, K. C. (2015). INSTEAD OF SUSPENSION: Alternative Strategies for Effective School Discipline. Duke Center for Child and Family Policy and Duke Law School, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.14678624.2010.01564.x/full>.