

In the summer of 2009, I was hired as the Chief Dean at Christian Fenger High School, a Chicago Public Schools' Turnaround School. The school received this designation because of its steadily declining test scores and rising student violence. The school year started with great optimism as former staff were replaced with newly hired staff and youth from another community were bused in to this newly transformed school.



On September 24, 2009 our optimism was replaced with tragedy. On this day a student-driven fight started in the school and spilled into the streets. Tragically, the fight ended with one student beaten to death. The fight was recorded by a student and posted on YouTube, where it quickly went viral being shown on every major news outlet.

In the midst of this turmoil and tragedy, I was charged with building a safe and structured environment for our staff and students. Unfortunately, the policy I was given was zero tolerance, dictating the use of suspension, expulsion and arrest as consequences to negative student behavior. With this policy in place, over 375 students were arrested that first school year with an even larger number being suspended and expelled. With no re-entry process in place, students returned from suspensions further disconnected from the school community.

These punitive policies did nothing to move our school toward the safe and warm environment we envisioned. Many students fell so far behind academically; there was little chance they would graduate. Our school was churning out violent, ill prepared young adults destined to end up unemployable, incarcerated or even killed. We needed a change. That change was a transition from using a Traditional Discipline approach to a Restorative Justice approach.

Traditional Discipline	Restorative Justice
Goal: To punish the youth	Goal: To restore (or transform) the community and individuals involved to the functioning equilibrium that was offset by the offense
Focus on Retribution	Focus on rehabilitation, and repairing the harm that was caused to all parties involved
Involves the "Rule Keepers" and the youth offender	Involves the community, the "youth harmer" and the " youth who was harmed"
Holds the youth offender accountable to the rules	Holds the youth accountable for the harm that was caused to the victim and the community as a whole

With this transition in discipline policy, my title changed to Culture and Climate Coordinator. Culture in an organization is what we practice, promote and permit. Climate is the overall feel in an organization. When I spoke to one of my students about this, he asked, "Are you still a DEAN?!" I told the students "Yes! I am the Dean of Peace. My role now is to create new pathways for positive students and staff interactions".

So how did we do this? We created a "system of care" in our school community by:

- Identifying a person or a team to focus on Culture and Climate.
- Creating a Peace Room to house our Social and Emotional Learning strategies, including but not limited to Family Group Conferencing, Restorative Mediation and Community Building/Conflict Circles.
- Training student leaders as Peer Ambassadors.

We also knew that partnering with a Social and Emotional Learning model to fit our students' needs was imperative. We needed something that supported students and staff through intentional teaching, practice, reinforcement and behavior correction based on social skills. To accomplish these goals we found [The Boys Town Education Model \(BTEM\)](#) and Restorative Practices.

Students were taught [social skills](#) in the classroom. While I supported teachers through observation, coaching and supporting staff's efforts to teach and reinforce these same skills throughout the school. This school-wide approach reinforced the skills students were learning in the classroom while giving them ample time and opportunity to practice these skills.

The positive approach to discipline and teaching new skills assisted our school through a very dark time in its history. Blending these two Social and Emotional Learning models were game changers in our attempt at creating systems of care across our school community and beyond.

Watch our story of change [here](#). And to learn more about adding Restorative Practices to your school watch our [FREE webinar](#).