

Public Comments 4/25/2018
Sharon Solorzano

Dear Superintendent Hutchings and Honorable School Board Members,

My name is Sharon Solorzano, and I am speaking tonight on behalf of Grassroots Alexandria. I have two daughters at TC Williams High School. I am also a Social Studies teacher at the middle and high school levels, and I am a trained Restorative Practice facilitator. I use Community Building Circles in my classes regularly and have personally experienced the positive outcomes of implementing Restorative Practice with my 6th graders.

I am here tonight to ask for expanded use of Restorative Practice as an alternative to suspending students out of school. Why should Restorative Practice matter to you as our City's educational leaders? "A suspension can be life altering. It is the number-one predictor—more than poverty—of whether children will drop out of school, and walk down a road that includes greater likelihood of unemployment, reliance on social-welfare programs, and imprisonment." —[neaToday](#) [1]

Too many of our City's young people are being suspended.

- The number of suspensions has gone up at every level. Total district-wide suspensions during the first half of last school year was 316. That number rose to 397 this school year.
- Middle school students, these are 11, 12, 13 and 14-year-olds, still accounted for the majority of suspensions, with 150 of the total 397 suspensions so far this school year. High school was a close second with 143 suspensions, and elementary school had a total of 72. This is shameful.
- Elementary school suspensions spiked most dramatically, more than doubling from 29 during the first half of the last school year to 72 so far. Who suspends elementary school students?

Worse, ACPS school discipline data reveals extreme racial disparities in the suspensions out of school, as well as vague and subjective reasons for suspensions including, "disrespect/walking away." Our young people deserve equity and excellence. Restorative Practice offers productive alternatives to suspension. In contrast to zero tolerance punishments that resort to suspension, Restorative Practice is an evidence based alternative that builds social skills enabling students to resolve conflicts with support from trained facilitators. Restorative Practice fosters positive relationships that improve the climate among all in the school community, which aligns with the ACPS Strategic Plan.

We want Restorative Practice fully implemented in our schools with fidelity. Punishing students by suspending, expelling or referring them to police has been linked to failing grades and harming social-emotional and behavioral development, “School suspension and expulsion can influence a number of outcomes across developmental domains, health and education. For example, students who are expelled or suspended are up to 10 times more likely to drop out of high school.” —[My Brother’s Keeper Task Force, Report to the President](#) [2]

Our neighbors in FCPS report that out of 1086 students who participated in Restorative Justice circles between September 2014 - June 2016, only 65 or 6% reoffended.—[FCPS Restorative Justice General Information Packet](#)

Suspensions feed the school to prison pipeline. We MUST do better for our vulnerable youth in the City of Alexandria. In collaboration with Tenants and Workers United, we at Grassroots Alexandria would like to know:

- 1) How many teachers will ACPS actually train in Restorative Practice in the next two school years?
- 2) How will the meager \$35,000 be allocated?
- 3) How many classrooms will participate in Community Building Circles next year?
- 4) When will students and teachers participate in effective evaluations of Restorative Practice in their classrooms and schools?
- 5) When will the results of such surveys be made public in a timely, accurate process?

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sharon Solorzano
Grassroots Alexandria

[1] <http://neatoday.org/2015/01/05/school-prison-pipeline-time-shut/>

[2] <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/doc>

[3] <https://www.fcps.edu/sites/default/files/media/pdf/RJInformationPacket.pdf>