

## Innovation Brief

# Partnering with Schools to Reduce Juvenile Justice Referrals

In Peoria, Illinois, a large number of African-American youth were entering detention for aggravated battery in one public high school. After learning more about the problem, local juvenile justice and school officials, with support from the Models for Change initiative, launched a pilot project to address fights and other incidents on campus using principles of Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ). Once implemented, the low-cost interventions resulted in a 35 percent reduction in school-based referrals to detention for all youth, and a 43 percent reduction for African-American youth. This pilot project served as a springboard for broader implementation of BARJ programming as an alternative to formal processing in schools and in the community.

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### The Issue

At the beginning of the Models for Change initiative, Peoria County might not have looked like a place where alternatives to arrest would easily take root. The jurisdiction logged some of the highest rates of formal processing, detention admissions, and juvenile justice commitments in the state. As in many jurisdictions throughout the country, youth of color were overrepresented at each stage of the process. For example, in 2009 African-Americans and Latinos represented just 28 percent of the youth population in Peoria County but 85 percent of referrals to secure detention.

A diverse stakeholder group, the Juvenile Justice Council (JJC), oversaw efforts to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in Peoria County. The collaborative included representatives from law enforcement, the judiciary, public schools, prosecutors, probation, city government, faith-based organizations, and parents. It was the JJC's efforts to understand the disparity in detention admissions that ultimately sparked work in the county's public schools.

With the help of national experts working with the Models for Change initiative, including the W. Haywood Burns Institute, the JJC conducted an in-depth study of detention admissions. The analysis showed that almost half of youth admitted—44 percent—were released at or before their detention hearing. The pattern of releases suggested that many youth entering detention were not necessarily a public safety risk, presenting a promising target for reform. Further, African-American youth represented almost 80 percent of those admissions, with aggravated battery serving as the leading reason for referral.

The data showed officials where to focus their efforts; however, they wanted to know more before identifying possible interventions. The JJC dug deeper into the data to identify the exact location of aggravated battery arrests. Stakeholders learned that almost half came from one public school in the City of Peoria: Manual High School. Homing in on one campus provided additional information that could help shape an effective alternative to arrest. Fortunately,

Manual High School personnel had actively participated in the county's efforts to reduce racial disparities, and they supported the plan to gather additional information.

Interviews with the school's administrators revealed that referrals for aggravated battery usually stemmed from incidents where school personnel tried to break up an altercation among youth. The incidents were categorized as "aggravated" because they occurred at school, not necessarily because of the severity of the altercation. The interviews also highlighted strained relationships between teachers and students. Surveys and focus group interviews with youth reflected that tension, as well a widespread belief that violence was an effective way to respond to disagreements. Teachers expressed concerns about school safety and frustration with a lack of effective options for managing behavior. Finally, an analysis of police reports showed some evidence of unequal charging practices among youth involved in school-based altercations.

### Innovations

Based on their research, Peoria County officials knew that a successful intervention would have to address both individual altercations and the broader school culture. The JJC proposed using Balanced and Restorative Justice principles as a way of resolving conflicts before they resulted in an arrest and referral to the juvenile justice system. After reaching agreement with educational officials, the Children's Home Association of Illinois (CHAIL), a local non-profit and service provider for at-risk youth, helped develop a series of strategies using restorative justice principles.

**Peacemaking circles.** Changing the culture at Manual High School began with a restorative justice technique called Peacemaking Circles. Circles offered a way for youth to air issues, work out misunderstandings, and resolve differences through a structured discussion led by school staff. CHAIL trained educators and other school staff in the technique during the spring of 2006, and introduced it on a voluntary basis. Trained staff used the Circles to keep disagreements from escalating into physical altercations. With additional support and training from CHAIL, Peacemaking Circles spread to seven other county schools

within three years of being introduced at Manual High School.

**Peer juries.** In addition to preventing altercations and improving school climate, officials were seeking a way to hold students accountable for disruptive behavior at school. For that, Peoria County looked to another BARJ program: peer juries. In 2008, CHAIL helped develop a program at Manual High School known as Motivating and Nurturing Youth Opportunity, or MANYO .

MANYO emphasizes youth-led, consensus-based conflict resolution. As Holly Snyder, Peoria County's restorative justice coordinator, explained, "It's about talking it out, not kicking kids out. The youth is held accountable, relationships can be repaired, and new social skills can be learned." The peer jury hears cases involving fighting, intimidation, insubordination, and other misconduct. Students, supervised by school administrators, can administer consequences such as mediation, writing assignments, and after-school detention.

### Revised school discipline policies and procedures.

CHAIL also learned that school personnel at Manual High School had been writing incident reports in a way that made detention the likely outcome of an altercation, regardless of the severity of the incident. Staff from CHAIL worked with administrators to ensure that incidents could be handled on school grounds by modifying disciplinary protocols and incorporating the alternatives into training for school staff.

### Student Responses to Peacemaking Circles at Kiefer Academy, 2009-2010

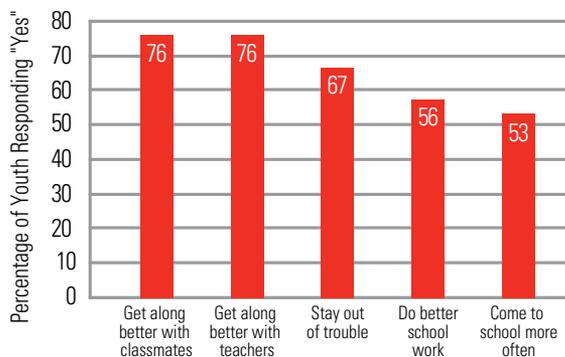


figure 1

**Targeted data collection.** Shortly after being introduced at Manual High School, Peacemaking Circles were adopted by Kiefer Academy, a school in Peoria County that provides special education for children who experience difficulty in their home school due to severe emotional, behavioral, or learning challenges. Staff at the school seized the opportunity to measure the Circles' impact on a range of indicators, including school climate and student behavior. With the support of Models for Change, CHAIL worked with school staff to develop qualitative surveys for teachers and youth, which Kiefer Academy administered during the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years.

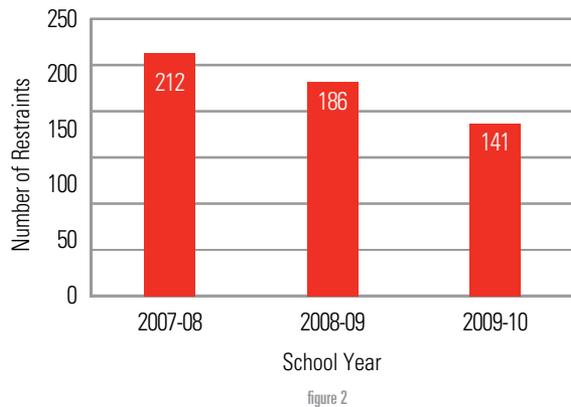
### Results and Lessons

At Manual High School, early signs suggested that the interventions were having their intended impact. Officials saw a 35 percent overall reduction in school-based referrals resulting in secure detention and a 43 percent drop for African-American youth. During the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years, peer jurors at Manual High School and two other Peoria County public schools handled 119 cases. Nearly all referrals involved offenses such as fighting, intimidation, insubordination, or other misconduct. The peer juries successfully handled 95 percent of their cases, with only a handful referred back to administrators for further disciplinary action.

Some of the most promising outcomes emerged from the county's alternative school, Kiefer Academy. School staff surveyed students during the first and second year following implementation of the Peacemaking Circles, asking them a range of questions related to their perceptions of school climate. In both surveys, over 75 percent of students reported that they got along better with classmates and teachers after the implementation of the Circles, with African-American youth being most likely to report improved relationships.

Teachers also reported positive outcomes. During the first year following implementation, 60 percent of instructors reported that the Circles had improved their relationships with their students, and 62 percent reported that Circles improved students' relationships with their peers. The

### Use of Restraints at Kiefer Academy



qualitative data gathered from teachers and students during the first two years after implementation helped demonstrate that the Peacemaking Circles were having their intended impact.

Quantitative data bore out the trends in these qualitative surveys. For example, 76 percent of youth at Kiefer Academy reported attending school more often during the first year after the Circles' implementation. This result squared with school records, which showed a 16 percent drop in absences during that time period.

School staff also tracked the use of restraints on the 53 youth who attended Kiefer Academy before and after implementation of the Circles. Restraints among those youth fell by one-third from the 2007-08 school year to the 2009-10 school year. The school's assessment of student behavior, performed using a standardized tool known as the Behavioral Evaluation Scale, also showed improvements in five key domains during the two years following implementation.

The reform efforts in Peoria yielded a number of lessons that can inform juvenile justice reform efforts in other jurisdictions:

- **Digging deeper into data helps focus limited resources on the most promising strategies for reform.** Peoria County's stakeholder group devoted a significant amount of time to learning about one target group: youth who were arrested for aggravated battery

#### Implementation Resources Available at [modelsforchange.net](http://modelsforchange.net)

- Peacemaking Circles Training Materials
- Kiefer Academy Student Survey
- Kiefer Academy Teacher and Survey

at Manual High School. Officials understood that they needed to know more about what was transpiring at the school before identifying the intervention that would have the best chance of reducing arrests and detention admissions. Surveys and focus groups with students and school staff, when paired with quantitative data, pointed to the need for interventions that would improve school climate and divert youth from arrest.

#### • Restorative justice principles can be effective tools to reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

Effective reduction of racial and ethnic disparities requires interventions that address the causes of those disparities. In Peoria County, that meant finding an approach that would improve school climate and help teachers and administrators reduce their reliance on arrests for disruptive behavior. By embracing restorative justice principles through two specific strategies—Peacemaking Circles and Peer Juries—officials were able to achieve both goals at relatively low cost.

### The Broader Impact

Peoria County's success stemmed from efforts to build relationships among juvenile justice officials, teachers, administrators, and service providers. Those relationships established the foundation for a coordinated, long-term plan that generated results. The coordination also ensured that many aspects of the programs were institutionalized.

For example, Kiefer administrators integrated Peacemaking Circles into the school's logic model for student outcomes, making the practice mandatory across all classrooms and ensuring that teachers captured weekly data on its use. This means that restorative justice principles continued to play an important part in daily school activities even after the end of financial support from the Models for Change initiative.

Additionally, thanks to positive outcomes from BARJ programming in public schools, restorative justice alternatives have expanded into the community. During October 2010, with Models for Change funding and technical support, the Covenant with Black America, the Peoria Police Department, and other community-based organizations launched a Community Peace Conferencing diversion program for nonviolent, first- and second-time juvenile offenders ages 10 to 17. Police can now refer cases to community volunteers trained in restorative justice techniques who work with youth, victims, and families to repair harm and hold youth accountable without formal prosecution.

### Resources

*Peer Jury Reduces Flow of Teens from School to Juvenile Justice System* <http://www.macfound.org/videos/97/>

*Models for Change: Innovations in Practice*

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/287>

*Collecting and Analyzing Data on Racial and Ethnic Disparities: The Peoria Pilot Project*

<http://www.modelsforchange.net/publications/218>

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This brief is one in a series describing new knowledge and innovations emerging from Models for Change, a multi-state juvenile justice reform initiative. Models for Change is accelerating movement toward a more effective, fair, and developmentally sound juvenile justice system by creating replicable models that protect community safety, use resources wisely, and improve outcomes for youth. The briefs are intended to inform professionals in juvenile justice and related fields, and to contribute to a new national wave of juvenile justice reform.