

changing school disciplinary practices to improve academic results

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS



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San Antonio, with a population of around 1.5 million residents, is the second most populous city in Texas and the seventh most populous in the United States. Its rich culture is heavily influenced by its diversity — particularly by the Latine and Indigenous populations that reside in San Antonio.

Though inhabited for thousands of years by the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation, the City of San Antonio was founded as a Spanish settlement in 1718 with the establishment of the Mission San Antonio de Valero, more commonly known as the Alamo. Bexar County — known to ancient tribes as Yanaguana, “the Land of Spirit Waters” — is home to nearly 65,000 Indigenous individuals and Alaskan natives.

“San Antonio is a city of beautiful colors and culture, heavily influenced by Indigenous culture,” said Chellie Fernandez, director of K-12 and Justice at UP Partnership, a network of 130 local partners working to create equitable outcomes for Bexar County youth. “But with that rich history comes stark disparities.”

Opportunity Insights, a Harvard-based think tank, conducted a special study of Bexar County, finding a strong link between race and economic mobility. Another factor was ZIP code, which is particularly telling in a city as segregated as San Antonio.

“Our city has experienced significant redlining, leading to segregation. We have pockets of wealth and of extreme poverty,” said

Fernandez. “Unfortunately, those pockets seem to correspond with residents’ race and ethnic background.”

These disparities have deeply affected the 17 school districts in Bexar County, creating roadblocks to academic preparedness and postsecondary completion for students of color.

“One of our biggest strengths is also one of the biggest challenges — we are one of the most diverse districts in Bexar County. So I’m very proud of that, but with that diversity brings a lot of needs and a lot of expectations for what our community needs,” said Jeanette Ball, Ph.D., superintendent of Judson Independent School District. “We’re a large district at 25,000 students, and we also span a large geographic region in both the very north and very south of Bexar County. We have four high schools, five middle schools and 20 elementary campuses, all of which have a significant student population qualifying for free and reduced lunch.”

Segregation and structural barriers have translated into economic disparity down the road, with Black boys and young men facing the most significant challenges. In San Antonio, the average earnings of white men who grew up in low-income households is \$29,070. Their Hispanic peers earn \$27,291 on average, while similar Black men earn just above \$20,000 annually.

UP Partnership

Founded in 2009 as the P16Plus Council of Bexar County, UP Partnership is a San Antonio-based nonprofit that serves as a backbone organization that partners with 500 leaders across eight sectors: early childhood, pre-K-12, postsecondary education, youth development, workforce, justice, funders and corporate partners, and local government. Together, these leaders work to create equitable systems and ensure that all young people in the county are ready for the future.

UP Partnership is focused on closing Bexar County’s geographic, racial, ethnic and economic divides that impact children and youth. As a backbone organization, UP Partnership has assumed a leadership role, offering the necessary infrastructure to further equitable outcomes.

“Essentially, our goal is to replace the school-to-prison pipeline with the school-to-college pipeline.” – Ryan Lugalía-Hollon, Ph.D., UP Partnership’s CEO

To advance postsecondary outcomes, part of UP Partnership’s strategy is to address disciplinary practices — specifically how they affect the journeys of young men of color through the My Brother’s Keeper San Antonio network.

“Essentially, our goal is to replace the school-to-prison pipeline with the school-to-college pipeline,” said Ryan Lugalía-Hollon, Ph.D., UP Partnership’s CEO. “Our students of color — especially young men of color — are the most likely to be criminalized. When that happens, systems can start to disinvest. And the first

disinvestment is not addressing the behavior directly. The opposite of disinvestment is investment. And when we invest in our young people, we create the opposite trajectory.”

School policies traditionally focus on exclusionary, punitive practices like out-of-school suspension. What is absent from this process is the examination of what actually happened and a resolution.

“We looked at the data across school districts and, almost always, young men and boys of color are the highest recipients of out-of-school suspensions,” said Fernandez. “Black girls are often in that data set as well, and we are mindful of that. Still, there is clear disproportionate discipline when it comes to young BIPOC males.”

The data shows a clear trend linking Black students with in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Recent studies identify two Bexar County districts among the top 10 Texas public school districts with the biggest disparity of instruction lost to out-of-school suspensions based on race. Across the state, 83% of Black males experienced an exclusionary punishment between grades 7 and 12.

Data shows that punitive approaches, within the education and justice systems, result in both short- and long-term challenges. Students targeted suffer from negative impacts

on academic achievement, future employment, physical and behavioral health, and income.

In the face of these challenges, My Brother’s Keeper San Antonio — one of four networks supported by UP Partnership — began to look at restorative justice practices and how they might shift an over-reliance on suspension and expulsion policies. Armed with data from across the county, the organization approached principals with the concept and were met with an overwhelming response.

“There was an absolute overflow of principals who wanted to opt in. So we allowed the districts to identify the schools that would participate in a pilot program,” said Fernandez. “We ended up with four elementary schools, two middle schools and three high schools in our first year.”

Superintendent Ball recalls her motivation for pursuing restorative justice for the betterment of students in Judson Independent School District.

“Our board and senior staff are extremely focused on equity. And looking at our data, it was clear we were failing our brown and Black students. These students were overrepresented when it came to out-of-school and in-school suspensions, and underrepresented in our graduation numbers,” said Ball. “So we knew we needed to do some things differently; if we didn’t, we were going to get the same results. Part of that equation is keeping them in school. The difficult reality is that the kids that were being suspended were being overlooked. We needed a change.”



UP Partnership CEO Ryan Lugalía-Hollon speaks at a community board meeting. More than half of his leadership table and board members are people of color.

systems transformation

UP Partnership is a member of the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, one of nearly 70 communities across the country committed to transforming systems to improve outcomes for young people.

Systems transformation occurs when communities build civic infrastructure that enables every Black, Indigenous, Latine and Asian youth and family and those experiencing poverty to have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential, cradle to career. This is a result of partnership with system leaders in making fundamental and institutionalized shifts in policies, practices, resources and power structures to eliminate structural racism and advance equitable outcomes.

“Our partnership with StriveTogether is the foundation of this work. Their increasing focus on racial equity and early seed funding were critical,” said Lugalia-Hollon. “We have also

learned from StriveTogether’s particular focus on how youth outcomes are impacted by systems besides just K-12s, since our strategy bridges school, juvenile and adult probation and community.”

With regard to restorative justice measures, UP Partnership is honoring the inextricable relationship between academic performance and social-emotional well-being. To that end, UP Partnership is currently tracking school attendance and disciplinary data and centers students’ emotional wellness through restorative practices. UP Partnership also tracks system-level indicators such as number of people trained, data systems built, restorative practice coordinators hired and more. This tracking helps the organization monitor the integrity of restorative practices, while also scaling whole-campus restorative practices using a survey tool designed by community partners.

restorative justice

Restorative justice is philosophically grounded in indigenous practices. It includes a variety of ways to mindfully engage with one’s community, create and maintain strong bonds, and proactively build relationships. It is often implemented in the resolution of conflict.

“Through restorative justice, we see people as people — even when they do wrong — and we seek to understand the basis of their behavior,” said Lugalia-Hollon.

For Ramon D. Vasquez of American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, restorative justice is an opportunity to reconnect with culture, honor values, and recognize the trajectory of the systems that were created and forced upon populations throughout the years.

“Restorative practices are about cultural values, how you commune together, and how you create opportunities, value and space,” said Vasquez. “Healing circles, called ‘circuitos’

by my people, are part of the way we conduct ourselves, and they can apply to any situation. They create space in a way that is central to who we are, create healing when it’s needed, and create opportunities to deepen the relationship to our culture on an Indigenous level.”

In recent decades, restorative justice has begun to be embedded in systems in the United States, including the justice system and education system.

“People think restorative justice is only for wrongdoing — harm doer and someone who has been harmed. Those parties sit down and find a resolution to have their needs met. That’s part of what restorative justice is. And in those cases, the differentiating factor of restorative practice is that the circle focuses on community support for the person harmed and the harm doer. There was an underlying reason for the harm and, if that



San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg engages with one of the active youth leaders from UP Partnership.

community partners

UP Partnership works directly with partner organizations to incorporate restorative justice practices within Bexar County schools. The following organizations play an essential role in training, facilitating, gathering data and continuously improving processes.

MY BROTHER’S KEEPER San Antonio convenes more than 30 cross-sector organizations committed to removing systemic barriers to

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safety, education and career success ensuring boys and young men of color attain a postsecondary degree and/or certification.

EMPOWER HOUSE began as a grassroots community health organization to improve infant and mortality rates among Black and brown communities. Its community health worker model evolved over the years into an after-school sanctuary for girls.

American Indians in Texas at SPANISH COLONIAL MISSIONS, dedicated to cultural preservation, was founded in the 1960s in

response to the desecration of tribal burial grounds. Through the years, the organization has worked with families and youth to seek equity for indigenous populations.

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION (IDRA) EAC-SOUTH works toward equity in public education and postsecondary achievement. The organization strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

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– Ramon D. Vasquez of American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions

is not addressed, the trauma remains," said Fernandez. "But restorative justice, on the whole, is not just addressing harm. It's a community-building process so when harm occurs there is a relationship to restore. In addition to conflict resolution, practices include talking circles and celebration circles — other ways to engage with community, a holistic approach."

Part of the restorative properties of these practices is to restore power to those who may feel they have none. That is particularly true when restorative justice is applied in schools — and especially true when dealing with young populations of color.

"The reality is that adults always have more power than young people. Through social control, we take away their power," said Fernandez. "Through restorative practice, we deconstruct power. We are consistently finding ways to take power away from youth and communities of color. So restorative justice is being honest about that imbalance of power in systems, and ultimately reversing it."

The deconstruction of power is prevalent in indigenous practices as well. For instance, in Coahuiltecan tradition, villages and tribal communities have operated within a system of leadership — however, chosen leaders

such as Temas (clan leaders) were not granted more power than their counterparts. Instead of power, leaders assumed certain obligations to those they served to ensure a high quality of life.

"There is a system of hierarchy that helps us operate — but what's not absent there is the voice of the people. We believe strongly that the person who is chosen to lead is not a 'leader' but is obligated to their people," said Vasquez. "Choosing leaders really means identifying people who have chosen to take care of those around them and ensuring they are safe, secure and happy."

Indigenous approaches to education can also influence restorative practices in schools. Schooling was not traditionally a tool for educating youth in local tribal communities.

"People created opportunities for education anywhere. Children would learn from an elder or wisdom keeper, or their parents would teach them on how to do things and what's important in life," said Vasquez. "Schooling is the one tool that operates under the goal of compliance. I heard someone say, 'Schooling is all about compliance, but education is all about liberation.' That's our hope for restorative practice in our schools."

rethinking discipline

From the beginning, UP Partnership has worked through the My Brother's Keeper San Antonio network to explore restorative justice models and how they could reduce — and potentially replace — punitive school discipline practices.

"Restorative justice invites adults to change their mental models. If an adult is coming from a punitive mental model, moving away from criminalizing behavior allows them to rethink and reinvest in their relationship with youth," said Lugalía-Hollon. "Restorative justice invites adults in the lives of young people to show up in different ways and to see those young people in different ways. And it's because of that, that we believe it's so scalable, because it's offering a clear paradigm shift."

It is important to note that the first step in implementing restorative justice is community-building. Before any healing can take place, establishing strong ties among students themselves — and with the adults around them — is paramount.

UP Partnership began its pilot, Rethinking Discipline Community of Practice, across three Bexar County school districts in 2019. The name changed to Restorative Practice Collaborative in 2021. The organization was responsible for developing the program's infrastructure, including funding, participants, partnership agreements and data-sharing agreements.

The pilot began with a three-day training for teachers and staff in the pilot schools. There, participants were introduced to the key principles of restorative justice in a session led by local nonprofit New Root, formerly known as Umoja.



Young men participating in the My Brother's Youth Summit.

Additionally, participants engaged in community-led dialogue with American Indians in Texas and Empower House through a screening of the film "Healing Justice."

"It was very important that we provide high integrity training. Restorative justice is not just a 'one and done' — it requires a plan and regular check-ins," said Fernandez. "As part of the training, our schools built out their plan for the year, a plan that they would evaluate on a monthly basis through communities of practice."

Restorative Practice Collaborative was focused specifically on attendance and discipline data, the two areas with the highest disparities between young men and boys of color and their counterparts. Partners also tracked the number of individuals trained, families involved, and the inclusion of restorative justice in the missions and visions of partners.

"Attendance and discipline only tells part of the

“We are restorative practice trainers, always centering equity in our practices.”

– Dr. Paula Johnson, senior education associate, IDRA EAC-South

story. We also needed to evaluate the integrity of implementation to understand the true impact we were having,” said Fernandez.

Throughout the year, UP Partnership turned to community partners to provide high-quality coaching in restorative justice. Organizations like Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) were embedded in the pilot schools to help them navigate the new effort.

“We are restorative practice trainers, always centering equity in our practices,” said Dr. Paula Johnson, senior education associate at IDRA EAC-South. “We try to be intentional about every child, every teacher, every classroom that is impacted by these practices.”

Each district appointed an internal liaison between UP Partnership and the district. That individual was responsible for supporting and coordinating monthly community of practice activities and serving as a resource for the school teams. University of Texas at San Antonio served as a facilitator for monthly sessions, in addition to taking the lead in data collection and evaluation.

Healing circles performed after physical and verbal incidents take place in different forms in Bexar County’s schools. While there are some standard elements of restorative practices involved, students and staff have room to customize the experience.

“The process in practice depends on the incident and the campus. One constant is that the circle

will happen in a designated peace room with a qualified administrator. Those that participate in the circle, however, vary in relation to the incident,” said Lugalía-Hollon. “There are times when teachers and peer students are involved, and times when they’re not. The harmed party also gets to decide whether they want to sit with the party that caused the harm. Unlike traditional punitive practices, the resolution is not predetermined.”

Restorative justice training was particularly designed to support a school’s ecosystem in a way that lifts up male students of color. That includes addressing bias, disrupting a harmful cycle of punitive practices and allowing students the opportunity to grow from negative experiences.

“The fact is, young men of color are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary disciplinary practices, which don’t allow for resolution of the conflict itself. We used to have physical incidents in high schools where the child involved would disappear for a few days, then just helicopter-drop back in. But no one was actually looking at what happened. So the student would come back to school without any resolution,” said Johnson.

She continued, “That’s why restorative practices can be transformative. It doesn’t always prevent behavioral issues, to be sure, but it goes one step further to open students up to social-emotional awareness, leadership and communication. You can own your actions — not necessarily without repercussions, but certainly without fear of punishment just for punishment’s sake.”

immediate results and gradual shifts

UP Partnership’s Rethinking Discipline Community of Practice rollout was structured to generate small shifts over the course of five years. The project is based on gradual, ongoing institutional behavior change. This includes a developmental continuum of milestones for restorative campuses through regular reflection, coaching and support.

Evaluation of the program was heavily rooted in data collection and analysis. UP Partnership prioritized the ability to share unidentifiable data from each campus involved.

“From a backbone’s perspective, data is the fun part of a project. It allows us to examine the landscape at the beginning of the year, and then at the end to map the shifts,” said Fernandez. “It’s not always easy. There’s a certain stigma to data, so it’s essential to build trust. Part of that is creating understanding around how data is being tracked, how it’s being used and why it’s related to moving the needle.”

UP Partnership and its partners track both disciplinary and attendance data on a monthly basis — two types of data points that relate



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directly to students’ time in the classroom and as part of the community around them.

“I think of it as three levels. Level one is, if you’re not in class, you’re not learning. Level two is, if you don’t feel connected to the adults in your environment, then you’re less incentivized to learn. And level three is, how deep is the belonging and inclusion that a young person feels in their school, especially a young person that is more likely to be criminalized,” said Lugalía-Hollon. “Restorative justice supports each of those levels.”

In its first year of restorative practices, Judson Independent School District saw drastic results, particularly in disciplinary incidents. Candlewood Elementary School experienced an immediate decline in September 2019, with incidents measuring at around 29% of the recorded incidents from the year prior. That trend continued throughout the year, holding steady at a 70% decline in February 2020.

“It’s been great. We’re seeing more students staying in school, fewer students being suspended and diverse students achieving more. Teachers are happier in the classroom with the results because they have tips and tools that they can use to help our students, parents that are also excited because they’re seeing their

child be successful,” said Ball. “I think that, in the long run, what we’re going to be seeing is higher graduation rates. More students going to college — and not just going to college, but going to college with scholarships. I think we’ll also have more students attaining certificates in trades. Across the board, students will truly be ready to join the workforce and to be productive citizens immediately after graduation.”

Restorative justice practices were also instrumental in helping schools’ resilience in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote learning created a disruption when it came to gathering data. However, when students from schools that implemented restorative justice returned to campus, both students and faculty were more prepared to build community and resolve inevitable conflict.

“Nationally, as students returned to campus this past fall, there was an increase in conflict. Schools that already had restorative infrastructure in place were at an advantage in navigating that conflict,” said Lugalía-Hollon. “Using federal Elementary and Secondary School Relief Fund dollars, San Antonio Independent School District actually made the decision to grow its investment in restorative practice coordinators on campuses, knowing that they could help to keep and spread the peace.”

lessons learned



Achieve change by inserting new ideas to existing systems

Cultural shifts are possible within systems, but it’s important to recognize implicit biases present in those systems and work within existing limitations.

“We do the best we can to maintain the integrity of our restorative practices so we can shift systems. But the reality is that sometimes systems are not set up to be high-integrity,” said Fernandez. “We can’t abandon all previous disciplinary practices in schools. They’re just not set up that way. What we can do is meet people where they are at in their practice and provide them with clear guidance on what high-integrity restorative practice is and isn’t.”

As a backbone organization, however, UP Partnership found ways to ensure that the community’s voice is heard — especially Black and brown communities.

“We are a neutral convener. But we are never going to be neutral on equity and deconstructing white supremacy — that’s our role as a backbone organization,” said Fernandez. “That’s why it’s important to be honest about the voices in the room and uplift those that are sometimes ignored. That’s how you preserve the culture and shift the system.”

Build the right team through active listening

Particularly when leading a team through systemic change and cultural shifts, it is important to bring on the right partners.

“A backbone organization has to be comfortable with one-on-one meetings, group sessions and continual information gathering to capture potential partners’ needs, wants and resources,” said Fernandez. “Not everyone is going to be the right fit, and that’s okay. But if you build a process so that people feel heard and seen, the right partners will follow through and stay committed.”

Center educational equity and justice

BIPOC youth — particularly young men and boys — have lagged in postsecondary success and, in turn, economic mobility due to a system that does not serve their interests.

“We try to build educational systems for the benefit of all students — but no one ever asks them what they want or need,” said Johnson.

Restorative justice works to reverse the impact that punitive practices have had on Black and brown boys and set all students up for the same level of success.

“It’s important for us to create systems of education that benefit all students. Restorative justice takes everyone’s needs into consideration for true equity, true belonging and student success,” said Johnson. “High-quality teachers who can meet the emotional needs of their students, administrators who know how to care for teachers and parents — it all makes a difference.”

Manage expectations

As is often the case with systemic change, the process can be slow and difficult. When approaching restorative justice work, patience is key.

“I think one of the biggest things that I’ve learned is, when you allow people to get trained and to come back and implement things, it’s okay if it’s hard. It doesn’t happen overnight,” said Ball. “Restorative justice is not designed to immediately fix things. It’s okay — we’re going to take a few stumbles, but in the long run, this is something that’s going to really benefit our kids.”

It’s also essential to reinforce what restorative justice is — and what it isn’t.

“There’s a myth that restorative justice will eliminate behavioral incidents. That’s not the case,” said Johnson. “What it will do is create a community that provides students with a sense of belonging so they know they are going to be seen and heard, no matter what.”

Support an entire ecosystem

Shifting the culture within a system requires the participation of everyone within that system. To that end, UP Partnership prioritizes training the entire campus as a restorative justice team. Giving campuses and leaders ownership over implementation and goal setting also helps transform school cultures — on their own terms.

“It can’t be a ‘train the trainer’ model. We need to train everyone — and then provide ongoing training. There is so much to learn and, in order to develop true restorative justice practices, the training never really stops,” said Johnson. “And sustainability of restorative practices is only possible if the whole school is on board.”

looking ahead

Even through a pandemic, because of the success of the first cohort in 2019-2020, 20 campuses signed on to explore restorative practices in year two and year three. The Restorative Practices Collaborative, led by UP Partnership, is currently conducting end-of-year assessments and exit interviews and setting up information sessions with prospective principals. The results, data and trends will help drive processes for UP Partnership’s Restorative Practice Collaborative year 4.

“The important thing to remember is that the work is ongoing and systemic change can’t be rushed,” Lugalia-Hollon said. “That’s why the rollout process is intentional, and our benchmarks go all the way up to 45 years. The goal is institutional behavior change over time through ongoing reflection, coaching and support.”



The partners of UP Partnership serve 400,000 young people.



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StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: help every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with nearly 70 communities across the country, StriveTogether provides resources, best practices and processes to give every child every chance for success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches more than 14 million students, including more than 8 million children of color and over 6 million children experiencing poverty. The network spans 29 states and Washington, D.C.

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