School Profile

Justice Isn’t Blind: Why San Francisco Day School includes diversity, equity, and inclusion work with restorative practices and why other schools should too.

By Dr. Ruth Bissell, Betsy Brody, and Loren Moyé

People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.

-Dr. Maya Angelou
Context matters: What happened?

In 2015, San Francisco Day School underwent significant leadership changes. The community welcomed a new head of school and a new middle school division head, both committed to bringing more diversity, equity, inclusion, and innovation to the school. Since then, there has been a systems-wide approach to the work, which includes the Board, our new lower school division head, our Dean of Faculty, and our admissions department. These changes provided an opportunity to review and refine policies, practices, and pedagogy. Analysis of the student handbook and varying classroom practices uncovered an unintentional misalignment with the school’s mission of nurturing and inspiring students from diverse backgrounds. Instead, the school was using punitive discipline practices. While faculty were steeped in Responsive Classroom training (which includes restorative practices), implementation varied and lacked cohesion with diversity work already underway. A small pattern began to emerge where some middle school students, who were boys and students of color, were sent to the office for disruptive behavior or needing time away from learning because of discipline problems. What was happening? The new division head had three wonders:

1. What would happen if we collaborated with our diversity directors to help adults consider cultural differences?
2. How might we grow as a community and reflect on how our own identities influence perspective?
3. How might we collaborate across roles to address faculty and student needs?

In sum, could we explicitly teach/learn how to make amends and repair harm in ways that were inclusive, addressed diverse perspectives, and were developmentally appropriate for students in a K–8 grade school?

Conflict is inevitable, combat is optional.
—Max Lucado

Over the course of four years, our team has guided discussions with faculty, circles with students, and conversations with families. One assumption we continue to test is: If our community (and the world) becomes more diverse, we may have more conflicts as varying ideas, perspectives, and experiences converge. Rather than avoid conflicts, perhaps conflicts can be teachable moments for students. Every student has an opportunity to reflect and tell “what happened” as a means of articulating their perspective while learning the perspective of others.

During faculty meetings, we have incorporated research and identity work into our conversations, shifting from focusing on negative student behaviors to delving into our own identities. If social biases can influence our interactions with and toward students, perhaps there is something we can do about it. Perhaps our own biases are influencing patterns of behavior and responses to student conduct? If so, what could we do to support students better so that they can achieve their educational goals? After an exercise led by our diversity team, one teacher acknowledged, “I didn’t realize how much this student upset me. Each time he doesn’t follow my directions, it reminds me of my first year teaching when I had a hard time working with boys.” Having this insight from a teacher created an opportunity for us to support both her and our students. It also provided an opportunity for our broader faculty community to engage in new ways of building empathy and validated why diversity, equity, and inclusion matter in all aspects of our work. (Note: During remote learning, what we call “connected learning,” we have continued to use these strategies and have adapted them to reinforce our school-to-home connection.)

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1The notion of discipline is based on perspective. A more appropriate way of thinking of student behavior and discipline could be in the frame of developmentally appropriate self-regulation and an individual’s ability to monitor and regulate their emotional behavior, over time understanding choices and the consequences of choices and actions. See Dan Siegel’s Brainstorm (2013). 2 NAIS has provided a sample of cultural identifiers that can help school communities consider the diversity of their stakeholders. Visit https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/sample-cultural-identifiers.aspx. We couple this with Dr. Steven Jones’s warm-up activity “Who are you” to help acknowledge the multiple identities/cultures in which we may participate.
Would you design a house without windows...and mirrors? Who were you being at the time?

_Students learn self-regulation best when they feel connected and safe, and they feel connected and safe when educators focus on building empathy instead of doling out punishment._ —Nathan Maynard & Brad Weinstein

Our restorative justice consulting work began with a presentation we did at the People of Color Conference (PoCC) run by NAIS. One of our session participants was Lisa Haney of California Teacher Development Collaborative (CATDC). She asked us to do a CATDC workshop, and that turned into an annual two-day summer course. As the idea of restorative practices gained traction, some additional schools and organizations reached out to request we do work with them individually. We have truly valued the opportunity to share our learning and teaching over the years in a multitude of environments!

As we work with our faculty and through our consultancy work with other schools, we ask educators to consider their teams’ diversity. Who reflects the student community? What myriad of social dynamics may be at play, including sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, race, and gender? Are there faculty of color? What affinity groups exist? We all have biases and have experienced bias, so how can we make sure that we disrupt our own patterns of thinking in order to support one another?3

Whether we are making advisory lists, creating student groupings, or revamping curriculum, we

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3 Consider Jennifer Eberhardt’s text *Biased* (2019), which analyzes social biases that impact American education and society.
consider the ways our young people’s identities will be reflected and supported. This now includes our approach to behavior and consequences. Inspired by Bryan Stevenson’s seminal work on the justice system, *Just Mercy* (2014), and a commitment to anti-bias work, we guide students and faculty so that when we make mistakes and experience conflicts, there can be opportunities for redemption and reflective growth.4

*When individuals have different perspectives and/or interpretations, and when they communicate with each other, they are obviously likely to arrive at better solutions than they might in isolation from each other.* —Dr. Scott E. Page

**One size does not fit all: Does the consequence help us grow?**

We continue to evolve as a school and consider all learners by incorporating Universal Design for Learning into our teaching practices.5 This has helped provide context for re-thinking classrooms and created opportunities for student choice so that every child has a sense of belonging and is an active contributor to their own learning. Faculty have embraced opportunities to create new learning spaces, student-friendly tasks, and lesson designs that incorporate student feedback and voice. As the diversity of learner needs is addressed, students are supported, feel a sense of belonging, and feel braver taking academic risks. The emphasis on celebrating and supporting the range of diversity within our community has aligned our academic and social-emotional work, decreasing off-task behaviors (and the perception thereof). We are more aligned and are providing the tools and resources to support every child in our community.

What norms support your school’s ecosystem? How do we make things right?

- Mistakes are expected, respected, inspected, and corrected...
- Make your teammates look good...
- Assume good will...
- Make “yes, and” statements...
- Be more curious than certain...

Reflection is essential for learning. We are intentional about modeling reflection and collaboration for students. For example, before faculty meetings, parent/guardian coffees, or launching into classroom activities, we review norms that were co-crafted WITH each group. How do we expect to work and learn together? How will we engage with one another? How will we support our community norms and community wellness during a pandemic? What might happen if we break these agreements? Our diversity work and norm-setting allow us to be, well, more human. All of the learners in our community can reflect on the classroom or community agreements they helped shape. We create regular opportunities to give gratitude and normalize apologies. And when a norm or community agreement is broken, we dialog and ask: What happened and how are we going to make things right? All community members affected may provide input on a logical consequence—promoting problem solving and conflict resolution. It is messy and iterative, requires thoughtfulness and dialoguing, and aligns with our school values of taking responsibility, having a growth mindset, and celebrating diversity of all kinds—key ingredients to sustaining intellect and imagination.

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4 In 2017, as part of our diversity, equity, and inclusion work, we read excerpts from *Just Mercy* and watched the documentary *Thirteenth* (Netflix, 2016) as a school faculty to discuss the impact of racial bias and systems of inequality that have influenced our American justice system. 5 For the past four years, San Francisco Day School has partnered with the CAST Institute to broaden our teaching practices to support the range of diverse learners in our community ([Universal Design for Learning](https://cast.org/udl/)).
I have a dream that we won’t have to talk about “restorative justice” because it will be understood that true justice is about restoration, and about transformation. I have a dream. —Howard Zehr

They hate your brilliance. They hate your beauty. They hate us. But we not gonna hate ourselves. —When They See Us

We are in the business of helping students self-regulate, develop empathy, and take responsibility when their actions or words harm others. Over the past five years, it hasn’t been easy, yet it has been worthwhile. It is no accident that in 2020 our leadership team is more diverse, and our conversations are more vibrant and transformative. We work with and guide faculty and students so that student engagement has increased, restorative circles and conflict mediation have replaced trips to the virtual and in-person office, and faculty take a more holistic approach to supporting all students by engaging in more culturally responsive thinking and learning. The journey to incorporating restorative practices and reflective language into our school community is ongoing and expanding to include adult affinity group work. We continue to work with our adults so that we can surface our own biases and disrupt our assumptive thinking about student behaviors. We continue to educate and listen to our students, so our cultural work is empathetic. We have a lofty goal of nurturing and inspiring all of our diverse learners so that they can make our community and our broader world a better, kinder place.

Throughout the enrollment process, it is important for prospective families to understand that we are a school that values the whole child and the relationships between community members. As such, we seek families through the admissions process that share our belief in embracing and learning from mistakes.

Our approach to restorative practices includes building a strong foundation as individuals as part of an inclusive and empathetic community. From kindergarten through 8th grade we are talking to our students about their identities and how as individuals with intersectional identities they fit into both our larger community and the subgroups to which they belong. We celebrate our students as individuals and as part of the

See Zaretta Hammond’s work *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* (2015) for further CRT pedagogical practices.
We also make sure the reverse is true, that the communities that make up the school take time to celebrate individuals. Restorative practices also help us frame the language we use when engaged in tough conversations. Again, the students are taught developmentally appropriate language to frame challenges and engage in problem-solving dialogues with peers and adults. Finally, a restorative justice approach allows students to see challenges as opportunities to take risks and not be afraid of failing because they know that they have the backing of a supportive community.

Our students recognize and value the school’s community norms, holding each other accountable when someone experiences harm. The older students see themselves as role models for the younger students. They understand they can make a difference in the world. Conflict resolution, having courageous conversations, and taking responsibility for one’s actions are just a few of the practices our students bring to their high school communities. They are seen as leaders and change agents. As high schools often highlight character and kindness as essential attributes, we are confident our students demonstrate these traits and then some!

Dr. Ruth Bissell has worked in both independent and public schools for the past 15 years. Over her 15 years in education, she has implemented restorative practices with middle school and high school students that have included the development of peer courts, the use of co-crafted restorative contracts, redesign of schoolwide discipline policies, and teacher and parent education on restorative approaches. She is the current Middle School Division Head at SF Day and is committed to using restorative practices to support student learning.

Betsy Brody has worked in educational institutions for 27 years, both in the classroom and as an administrator. Her journey began in France where she taught ELL ranging in age from 5 to 85 in public schools, specialized educational industries, and private homes. Seven years ago she joined San Francisco Day School as Director of High School Counseling and Co-Director of Diversity.

Loren Moyé has been teaching for 29 years, 22 of which have been at San Francisco Day School. Prior to SF Day, he taught in the San Francisco Unified School District. His teaching experience covers third and fourth grades, all subjects, and seventh and eighth grade math. He was formerly a co-director of Aim High, a free summer program for low income middle school youth in the Bay Area. He is currently the Director of Diversity and Dean of Faculty at SF Day and on the staff for the National SEED Project.

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**RESOURCES**
- Restorative Justice: Tips for Schools
- Lit. Review on RJ in Schools (WestEd)
- Peer Court
- The Little Book of Restorative Justice by Howard Zehr with Ali Gohar
- Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson
- Restorative Justice Implementation Guide by Oakland Unified School District
- Edutopia: 8 Tips for Schools Interested in Restorative Justice by Fania Davis