

# Safer Schools . . . Student Talk About 'Talking Circles'

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***“WE NEED MOOD DETECTORS, NOT METAL DETECTORS.”***  
**IN MEMORY OF 15-YEAR-OLD GEORGE CARTER,**  
**CO-FOUNDER OF RETHINKING SCHOOLS – NEW ORLEANS**

Before the latest horrific school shooting, Counselors Not Cops and Restorative Justice represent key demands advocated by student activists. In contrast to conflict resolution efforts, pro-active building circles are designed to knit together the school community and provide an opportunity for students to talk through mundane issues to burning concerns. These talking circles can flag deep problems and often resolve problems before they explode. Now in school districts across the country, prioritizing and funding restorative practices are likely to be undercut by massive spending for metal detectors and other security systems. Our 2017 Listening Project sought to learn what students thought about talking circles. Their experiences and recommendations hold even greater significance as the debate intensifies on to make schools safe.

The photo above shows a dozen or more students sitting in a talking circle as they wait their turn to receive a talking piece to respond to a topic raised by a circle-keeper, usually a teacher or counselor. A student may describe a feeling, express an opinion, move the conversation in another direction, or decide not to say anything in this first round or subsequent ones. Some circles are conducted as a quick check-in but deeper conversations happen regularly during an entire class period. These building circles often will begin with an inspirational quote, introducing the significance of the talking piece used, and follow other indigenous traditions. Circles represent a safe space where divergent views are respected and not judged.

This seemingly simple process of listening and learning from others can have profound impact. The equalitarian nature of the circle with no beginning or end is designed to create a sense of

connectedness and build relationships that may improve the overall school atmosphere. Another potential benefit of pro-active circles is to resolve misunderstandings, rumors or conflicts and avoid responsive or healing circles. Attention tends to be focused on reactive circles and other restorative justice practices intended to replace zero tolerance policies and reduce out-of-school suspensions. Research studies and school district evaluations give less weight to talking circles and in these report cards that we have reviewed, only a handful of quotes by students are included.

Do students believe in the value of circles, dismiss them as childish or mushy kumbaya, or see this process as effective in stopping punitive discipline policies and the school-to-prison pipeline? Individual interviews with students at public high schools large and small as well as our national online scan provide a glimpse at youth perspectives. Not even the most 'woke' teacher or restorative justice coordinator can speak for the primary stakeholders in the classroom. What follows are the reflections and recommendations of approximately 50 students from over 15 states.

### **The vast majority of students described talking circles in a positive light.**

- *a different kind of smart*
- *let out emotions*
- *reading people's feelings*
- *actually listen*
- *confidence*
- *help each other out*
- *respect each other's opinions*
- *listen with your heart, think with your heart*
- *feel more stress-free*
- *more sociable*
- *feel like I'm heard*
- *helps me deal with people and social situations and life*

**Today's students represent the first generation to gain these face-to-face interpersonal skills that some claim are more important than ever given the dominance of digital human interactions. In the words of one Detroit high school student:**

*Everybody is changing into a better person when they have these small circles.  
I think all of us have learned to see in a different way and I treat people differently.  
The circle has made me want to go out now to the public and speak and do some good...you know help change the world!*

Not all students had good things to say, for example, one 10<sup>th</sup> grader said “circles aren't a waste of time, but they are too scripted and boring.” Reflections are organized in the following categories: Creating Camaraderie, Connecting with School Staff, Confronting Controversy and Crisis, Gaining Skills and Confidence, Applying Circles Beyond School, followed by numerous recommendations by high school students from California to South Carolina who advocate for restorative practices. To provide confidentiality, verbatim quotes by those students interviewed are identified by the pseudonyms they

chose. A sampling of multi-generational advocacy organizations including Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth and Padres & Jovenes Unidos are included at the end of this report.

### CREATING CAMARADERIE

*You guys give me a lot of hope. Our advisory is like a family. I see police brutality, tragedies and stuff like that. Instead of me being depressed about life, I know I can talk with my community. They understand and most of time if it's something i'm going through, they probably been through it before. - Matthew*

*Oh, that's who you are. That's interesting...that's cool you know it's something that I didn't know. Something new that I learned like now I can just like see that person and agree with their perspective, like parts of how they felt, like parts of their perspective of what happened. - Anonymous*

*Every Monday we used to talk about how we feel. I have no family here. I live alone. When I was talking about it with them, I felt like I was talking with my family. If we were in trouble, we all help each other to fix it. - Alexander*

*The circles changed my life. I had many problems. Problems in the street. In circles, they say, ah man you cannot do that. Think about your future. - Oscar*

*We don't have enough connections. Circles create a space where people can talk about our feelings, home life. - Kayliah*



### CONNECTING WITH SCHOOL STAFF

*Our teacher shares many things with us. She is special. My classmates, we are like a family. It's like a union. - Oscar*

*First time I did one of these [circles], why do we do have to do these? I thought they were a waste of time but over time, I think it's good to talk with friends and a teacher. They listen to us. They participate in the circles. They think it is beneficial not for them but for us. I understand how it brings the community together. - Toto*

*Having teacher in circle we can connect in a personal way...I've gained a lot more friends. I've gained more confidence. I'm a little bit more outgoing. - Laris (testifying to her school board)*



*In one of my classes, someone had used a very inappropriate word. It was extremely offensive. We had a circle. We talked about the meaning of the word. Talked about how offensive it was. One of my teacher shared how he used the word when he was a teenager. He didn't know the context. He was shocked he ever used it and the effect on other people. That was a special case. Most teachers don't reveal that much. - Toto*

*I didn't [realize] those teachers had dreams and aspirations and...Oh, we like the same things. But then once we get to know each other, then we can really explore and talk about other things. - Anonymous*

*The circles are basically the only thing that help me, and the teachers have helped me, because I used to be the kid that just fought back in class...but here it's just different. I'm more interacting in the groups and in class. I really feel like these things are helping and they're really good for students who are failing and having troubles. - Chad*

## **CONFRONTING CONTROVERSY AND CRISIS**

*We mostly talk about what's happening around the world. Usually we talk about our personal feelings about laws and political and all kinds of different subjects. You can say your opinion without being judged and that is kind of the main idea of circles. - Anonymous*

*From those circles about the [2016 presidential] election, I still remember what almost everyone said. One of my friends from Mexico and he was talking about some part of his history. There was a student in one of his classes and they were looking for him and he's probably being deported. For him, that's huge. That's reality. That kinda opened my eyes. - Tara*

*People [are] very brave about voicing their opinions even if they are not the majority. Being able to come out and not necessarily feel comfortable but voicing their own opinions even if people might disagree. Many aspects that make the circle work: The teacher who's with you, students who will respect it, maybe challenge it but in a very respectful way, and the knowledge that what is said in the circle stays in the circle. - Gloria*

*Being a part of the first circle [at my school], we were able to hear what others were saying. It was heavy. It [racial slur] impacted me and my friends to speak our feelings but hear what other students were saying in a safe environment with a leader willing to listen. -Victoria*

*We had multiple circles talking about feelings and experiences [after classmate died]. That definitely helped. It uplifted the whole school. - Toto*

*It [circle] made me feel secure amidst all of the fighting and police here...I can just like breathe. - Anonymous*

*I think it is more of important now, with social media and with technology you can only get so much of the story. On Twitter you get 280 characters as opposed to in the circle. It's a lot different to hear them face-to-face and hear their entire thought rather than a headline or one bit. - Tara*

### **GAINING SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE**

*Definitely communication. Before circles I had some trouble talking. Sometimes I couldn't come up with the right words. When it was my turn, I was nervous. Circles helped me with public speaking. I wasn't the only one having troubles. - Toto*

*I feel like I've gotten better at reading people--reading people's feelings. If your back is straight, looking ahead, you are really interested or like if you are frowning, you are upset or not in the mood for anything. - Myra*

*If you are feeling bad, you express yourself. My skills--now I can talk with other people. - Oscar*

*Circles also teach you a ton about yourself that you really don't see. I want to teach the generation to be socially conscious. Be aware of other people's emotions and feelings. - Tara*

*Everybody is changing into a better person when they have these small circles. I think all of us have learned to see in a different way and I treat people differently. The circle has made me want to go out now to the public and speak. I want to call the President and tell him that we can no longer go into other people's countries; that we can no longer go to war. I want to speak and do some good ... you know help change the world! - Anonymous*

### **TALKING CIRCLES BEYOND SCHOOL**

*You can try to speak and try to make a circle with the boss [at the restaurant]. Yes, I asked him for a circle to have a meeting. Sometimes when we have some problems, I try to do a circle with my co-workers. I got the idea from school to deal with work problems. - Melissa*

*In my job, one day I suggested a circle. It was not my problem but I said we need to fix this and do a circle. And because I did that now the co-worker and the supervisor they are friends. And I learned that in this school. - Oscar*

*I have talked about this to my parents a lot and it has definitely changed our home environment. Whenever there is a conflict, we try to do a circle and we each talk about how we feel. I have gotten to know them more. - Espino*

*When I was a freshman, I got into trouble with gangs and fights and stuff. And so it led me to getting almost a police ticket...If it wasn't for restorative justice, I wouldn't be here. I want to study to be a teacher. I want to be part of the community. - Brandon*

*I'd told myself I never wanted to become a teacher [she worried about dealing students as unhappy as she once was] but now if you're a teacher, it's because you're passionate about kids.*  
- Maria

*I am passionate about restorative justice because the people it will impact--if implemented correctly--my family, there are my friends, kids I will have in the future, everybody close to me and dear to my heart.* - Salem

## **STUDENT RECOMMENDATIONS**

*In my opinion it doesn't matter how welcoming the school is, I think you never can get through a time period or get to a place when you don't need community building things. I have a lot of classes where there is a positive energy that don't use circles, but that doesn't say they are not necessary.* - Tara

*Yes, I have recommendation. When you start at a new school, you need to speak with others and with new co-workers and you become friends. I would like circles in all classes.* - Melissa

*The norms of the circle are respect the talking piece. When you have it, you have the honor of talking [and] when you don't, you have the honor of listening. No technology--unless it is important--to show respect. What happens in the circle stays in the circle unless it needs to be discussed again outside.* - Esmeralda



*We talk about the school-to-prison pipeline and racial injustice in class. We give chances for students to talk about a problem. And suspensions are really crazy...It makes me really upset that students are pulled [out of school] because of their beliefs or the color their skin. Here [restorative justice class] we actually talk it out and that's what makes the school really good with discipline.* - Myra

*Circles are not a waste of time but make them shorter and cut to the point. We follow the same kind of formatting...Don't make it scripted.* - Charlie

*Train 20-30 students to become circle-keepers;  
Designate class periods when circles will be held;  
Train every classroom teacher on relationship-building and harm circles; and  
Train every administrator on harm circles.*  
- Alexandria United Teens



*Last year 15 teachers were trained. Then we got a new principal so I don't know if that initiative is still going on. That's the stalemate. I feel like the teachers need to be trained first in order for students to be trained. I've studied restorative justice for a year and I don't think I'm ready.*  
 - Tara

*Being a part of the first circle [in middle school], we were able to hear what others were saying. It was heavy, it impacted me and my friends to speak our feelings but hear what other students were saying in a safe environment with a leader willing to listen. I've taken this work of restorative practices to teach others to do programs in high school. Going forward, it should be expanded so much in high school. For so many students things happen and many students don't feel they are heard.* - Victoria (testifying at her school board)

2. [Call to Order 7:00 p.m.](#)
  - a. Approval of Agenda
  - b. Announcements
  - c. Approval of Personnel Agenda and Addendum
3. [Principal's Update 7:03](#)
  - a. Restorative Practices Update/WIN Group (10 minutes)
   
[Restorative Practices Update/WIN Group](#)
4. [Comments 7:13 p.m.](#)
  - a. SIT Comments

*We need to invest in more counselors and less on police as an effort to reform the overall school system. We will not allow our needs to be disregarded... We are tired of false promises about ending school suspensions which are still very high in this district. We hope you will support restorative justice because if we are not able to get it implemented, then the next generation will have to fight for restorative justice until all schools are safe and healthy environments for all students.* - Jonathan

*We wanted to change our school, to make a difference. We never thought it would be this big [students wrote a grant and received \$113,000 to create a new restorative practices coordinator position]! - Bisharo*



*As students we need our voices to be heard and need to be included in decisions that affect our education. - Janaya*



*Invest \$20 million to expand Restorative Justice in [NYC] public schools...The city's investment in Restorative Justice in schools is less than \$1,000,000. You don't build safe and supportive schools by suspending and criminalizing students. You build safe and supportive schools by investing in Restorative Justice to develop strong relationships between students, educators, and parents and by adopting policies that create a fair and just approach to discipline. Our city must stop investing in the school-to-prison pipeline and start investing in our future. If all Black Lives Matter it is time for our schools to treat us all with dignity and respect. - Zaire & Miajia*

*The current job description [restorative justice coordinator] includes nothing regarding levels of training especially about sexual harm and trauma, and this is definitely inadequate. I think it's imperative that such complex difficult cases are really administered by professionals who are trauma informed or else the security and effectiveness of restorative justice is compromised. - Uma*

*For too long, harsh school discipline practices have contributed to the under-education and over-criminalization of young people, and especially youth of color. Illinois legislators have demonstrated that by listening to students, we can create schools where all students are valued*

*and supported in their learning. SB 100 makes Illinois go from one of the worst states when it comes to overusing exclusionary discipline, to being a national leader with a model for other states to follow. - Dalia*



*I was the only student at the conference in 2016. Last year I was the only student on the panel but there were about 15 other students. - Avery*



Avery Trinh discusses restorative justice in an afternoon panel during the second Restorative Justice in Education Academy at Eastern Mennonite University. Trinh, a rising senior at Wilde Lake High School in Columbia, Maryland, joined teachers and administrators to provide reflections about restorative justice in education. (Photos by Joaquin Sosa)

*Restorative justice is not a program it's a way of life. I want to leave a good legacy for my sisters and all the other kids coming up. - Ange*

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This survey reveals that pro-active talking circles can be a life-changing or life-saving for some students. Those youth who believe in this process make numerous suggestions including participating in circles on a regular basis, training for teachers, and involving students as circle-keepers or co-facilitators. Those who are less enthusiastic concede circles can be useful in helping shy students open up and also recommend circles to talk about incidents and burning issues that happen in the school or on the street. Students who advocate for circles and restorative justice tend to emphasize that interpersonal growth is not enough but emphasize the root cause of problems as well as systemic disparities in all schools must be addressed. These reflections and recommendations represent a glimpse through the lens of the primary stakeholders in public high schools across the country.

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A few of the leading multigenerational advocacy organizations in the US:

Alexandria United Teens (VA) <http://www.tenantsandworkers.org/projects>

Dignity in Schools (NY) <http://dignityinschools.org/>

Padres & Jovenes Unidos (CO) <https://padresunidos.org/campaigns/end-the-school-to-jail-track/>

PowerU (FL) <http://poweru.org/>

Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (CA) <http://rjoyoakland.org/>

Voices of Youth for Chicago Education (IL) <http://voyceproject.org/>

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