



TRANSFORMING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

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JOHNS HOPKINS
CHILDREN'S CENTER

MARCH 2021

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What did we do?

The Rales Wellness team provided expertise, support, and resources as KIPP Baltimore brought to fruition their vision of a school culture based on principles of restorative practices, trauma-informed approaches, and concepts of social justice. The Wellness team partnered with school and regional leadership to collect and analyze data, evaluate existing and potential initiatives, interview leaders in the field of trauma-informed approaches, outline strategy, develop and conduct staff professional development, and assess the effectiveness of new approaches. These activities supported KIPP Baltimore in adopting restorative approaches to discipline, implementing an evidence-based trauma-informed social emotional learning curriculum across all grades, integrating core concepts of social justice and culturally relevant pedagogy, and adopting a whole child approach to school climate and culture.

Rationale

The social and emotional climate of a school is a crucial foundation for students' health, development, and educational success [1]. KIPP Baltimore's desire to shift their school culture toward a more restorative and trauma-informed model was based on two core ideas: 1) trauma has lasting health and educational impacts and is pervasive in the school community, and 2) traditional exclusionary, zero-tolerance policies are both ineffective at changing student behavior and harmful to students' long-term success.

KIPP Baltimore students are at higher risk of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) [2]. ACEs have lasting physical and cognitive effects that can impact students' academic performance [3-5]. In addition, racial trauma, especially systemic racism and racialized violence, pose a persistent threat to students' wellbeing [5]. Beyond the impacts of racialized trauma, KIPP Baltimore and the Rales Wellness team also recognized the negative impact that punitive, zero-tolerance, exclusionary discipline practices have on students, especially students of color. Schools that focus on developing positive relationships with students have better student engagement and academic achievement [6] and fewer problematic psychosocial outcomes [7].

Summary of Implementation and Results

Evidence to support universal trauma-informed instructional approaches has burgeoned in the last five years. The Rales Wellness team worked closely with the school to ensure that staff were aware of the prevalence of trauma and its impact on students. The team provided staff with best practices in trauma-informed instructional approaches and supported the implementation of Conscious Discipline as their primary social emotional and trauma-informed model.

Bringing about significant change in a school takes time. KIPP Baltimore's effort to change culture and climate to be more restorative, trauma-informed, and social justice-oriented has been a long and challenging process. The Wellness team and school leaders worked to slowly transition mindsets by deepening understanding of core concepts, developing change champions, piloting best practices, assessing the impact of these changes, and ultimately developing a lasting implementation plan.

Dissemination

- Creating a school of social justice and trauma-informed model of SEL. Presented at the 2020 American School Health Association Conference (virtual).
- How to Create a Trauma Sensitive School: Essential Components; poster presented at the 2016 American School Health Association Conference, Baltimore, MD.

Impact

- We hoped our work would lead to a significant decrease in exclusionary discipline practices. Suspension incidents decreased markedly in KIPP Harmony from Year 2 to Year 4, a change that reflects not just culture and climate programs, but also changes in district policies about suspension of the youngest students. In contrast, suspensions at KIPP Ujima increased substantially over the course of this work. We believe that other factors, including changes in leadership and challenges with staff turnover had a greater impact on these numbers than culture and climate efforts.

Suspension incidents Year 1 through Year 4

	SY1516	SY1617	SY1718	SY1819
Both Schools	181	385	392	589
Harmony	--	226	101	105
Ujima	--	159	191	484

**Data were available in the aggregate for SY1516*

- One of the key areas where we did see marked improvement, at least partially connected to this work, is teacher responses on key culture and climate indicators on The New Teacher Project Survey (TNTP). From spring 2016 to fall 2019 there was a:

- 23% increase in the proportion of teachers who felt the curriculum was culturally relevant to students
- 16% increase in the proportion of teachers who felt that across the school there were consistent expectations and consequences for student behavior
- 20% increase in the proportion of teachers who felt that interactions between students and adults at the school were respectful
- 22% increase in the proportion of teachers who felt that school leaders promoted a safe and productive learning environment
- 20% increase in the proportion of teachers who felt school leaders provided them with the support they needed to maintain high standards for student behavior in their classroom

LESSONS LEARNED

- *We found that two factors were most influential in advancing culture and climate shifts: 1) relying on evidence to demonstrate the importance of culture and climate; and 2) gaining the investment of trusted academic leaders. Staff trusted their leadership's decision to invest in culture and climate programs, were more willing to experiment with best practices in their classrooms, and felt more confident about how the school was responding to behavior concerns.*
- *The Wellness team's ability to provide expertise, resources, and support to school leaders proved essential in bringing about the changes the school desired.*
- *Three key factors in our success were:*
 - *Relying on evidence and research-based programs*
 - *Leveraging best practices from academic school change models*
 - *Commitment to working collaboratively with school partners to understand and meet their needs*
- *Identifying and investing in highly respected staff to serve as change champions early in the process was essential to shifting staff mindsets. Having change champions serve as early adopters allowed other staff to see the impact of the programs in classrooms similar to their own.*

KIPP Staff Member

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We are grateful to all those who have joined us in our mission to create models of school health that help every child to achieve their full health and academic potential. Special thanks to the Norman and Ruth Rales Foundation and our partners at KIPP Baltimore; without them this work would not be possible.

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