

# SUSPENSION BRIDGING

Shawn Thomas first met Aryana Booker in 2016. They were in a fourth-grade classroom at the now-closed Dickson Elementary School in the Woodland Hills School District, east of Pittsburgh, and sat across from one another for a candid conversation.

Mr. Thomas, a certified social worker, was the district's newly arrived restorative practice coordinator. He had been tasked with implementing the Just Discipline Project, an initiative offering school discipline alternatives such as having both students and teachers use compassionate approaches to conflict resolution.

Aryana Booker, who has attended Woodland Hills schools since pre-kindergarten, was a gifted but difficult fourth-grader. She had no problem finishing her homework and acing exams, but heated arguments with her teachers and fellow students were a regular part of her school day.

"She was a wild child," said her mother, Dapri Pullie, a nurse at the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood. "Her behavior never affected her grades, but she wasn't really focused. It's like she was bored."

Following one particularly fraught encounter between Aryana and a classmate, their teacher called in Mr. Thomas to restore peace.

**The Just Discipline Project's alternatives to old-school punishment enhance students' interpersonal skills while avoiding punitive measures that could have long-term consequences.**  
By Bill O'Toole

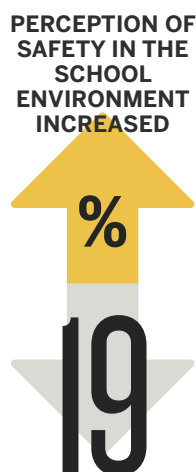
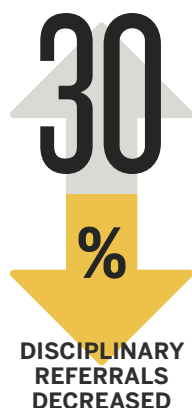
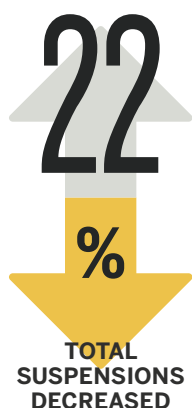


As the restorative practice coordinator for the Woodland Hills School District, Shawn Thomas is guiding school staff in using alternative methods to address student behavior and create a positive learning environment for everyone.



Seventh-grader Aryana Booker exemplifies the goals of the Just Discipline Project. Not only has the program helped to improve her behavior, but she also is now a student leader assisting with restorative practices at her school, such as this healing circle conversation with other students.

## TWO-YEAR RESULTS FROM THE JUST DISCIPLINE PROJECT AT WOODLAND HILLS INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL.



# culture BUILDING

The Just Discipline Project's restorative approach to addressing student behavior helps to build healthy interpersonal relationships and a positive school culture as well as providing discipline alternatives. Practices include regular group discussions known as "healing circles" that are organized to encourage students to air negative emotions and share interpersonal conflicts. In addition, more light-hearted interschool events are offered, such as "Jeopardy!"-style quiz games and activities inspired by the House Cup Challenges from the "Harry Potter" series.

“Being in the leadership group has held me to a higher standard, where teachers labeled me as a leader, which was stressful because people were always making sure I never had a slip-up.”

**Aryana Booker**, student, Woodland Hills High School

“I was asked by one of her teachers to do an intervention the Just Discipline Project calls ‘healing circle’ between her and another student,” he recalled. “A healing circle is requested when two or more students have a conflict that has a high potential to turn either verbally or physically aggressive.”

Mr. Thomas was struck by how actively Aryana participated in the intervention, calmly sharing her emotions and patiently listening to her combatant.

“Ever since that encounter I began to challenge her socially and academically in an effort to nurture her high potential,” he said.

Now in seventh grade, Aryana is the one doing the interventions.

She serves as one of Mr. Thomas’ lieutenants in Just Discipline’s Leaders in Training (L.I.T.) team, a group of several dozen students who receive special training to help embed restorative practices into every aspect of school life.

“Mr. Shawn helped me look at myself as a leader,” Aryana said. “Once I did, it really helped me a lot.”

Prior to implementation of the Just Discipline program in the Woodland Hills School District, an argument between students would likely have led to one or both being sent out of the classroom, maybe getting a few hours of detention for good measure.

While that may seem like a reasonable response, such punitive, zero-tolerance policies can have tragic consequences, especially in underserved, majority African American school districts like Woodland Hills.

Dr. James Huguley, interim director of the Center on Race and Social Problems at the University of Pittsburgh, has spent his career studying school discipline. He said that exclusionary discipline measures such as removing a student from the classroom only have the effect of further alienating troubled students, leading to escalating infractions and escalating punishments, including suspensions and expulsion.

Also, data suggests minority students are much more likely to get caught in the vicious cycle.

According to Heinz Endowments–funded research by Dr. Huguley and his team at the Center, African American students are, on average, seven times more likely to be suspended than their white peers across the Pittsburgh region. Overall, 37 out of 51 school districts in Allegheny County have suspension rates for black students that are at least double the rate of their non-black peers.

As Dr. Huguley explained, the data is all the more troubling because “suspension and expulsion are the gateways to the school-to-prison pipeline.”

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the national phenomenon wherein exclusionary discipline policies such as suspensions in primary and secondary schools lead students to have increased likelihood of entering the juvenile justice system.

After collecting the research on the problem, Dr. Huguley and his team started brainstorming solutions.

“I think we knew, and Heinz knew, that we wanted to do something about it,” he said.

From these discussions, the Just Discipline Project was born.

While a growing number of districts across the country, including Pittsburgh Public Schools, now incorporate restorative practices into their curricula, programs with dedicated staffers like Mr. Thomas are rarer, and may well offer lessons to schools across the country.

After making observations and conducting some early activities in the district in the spring of 2016, Mr. Thomas started working full-time in the fall semester at Woodland Hills Intermediate School, which serves students in grades six through eight.

His responsibilities include leading specific interventions, like the healing circles, that encourage students to air negative emotions and interpersonal conflicts in a calm, constructive manner.

In addition to working with the students, he helps train the teachers on how to conduct their own circles and de-escalate conflicts in the classroom, as well as strategies to be more active and engaged in the social lives of students.

But his job is much more than reacting to every new crisis. Working with faculty and L.I.T. student leaders, Mr. Thomas



# IDEA EXCHANGE

A University of Pittsburgh education forum on addressing the school-to-prison pipeline challenges participants to think differently about discipline and justice. by Carmen J. Lee



They came from across the country — about 450 people strong — to exchange ideas, best practices and a shared sense of outrage about what has come to be known as the school-to-prison pipeline.

The pernicious phenomenon that connects racial disparities in school discipline to juvenile detention and adult imprisonment was the focus of the July

educator forum, “Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Reimagining Policies, Practices and Politics in Education.” The University of Pittsburgh School of Education’s Center for Urban Education organized the three-day conference, which was funded by The Heinz Endowments.

Participants interacted with local activists and some of the nation’s renowned academic and social justice thought leaders. Among the internationally recognized justice system reform advocates were television journalist Marc Lamont Hill and legal scholar Michelle Alexander, whose acclaimed best seller “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” is often credited with elevating awareness of America’s prison population crisis and its racial implications and impact.

While topics ranged from grassroots activism to mentoring, central themes included confronting racist practices in schools, advocating for students of all backgrounds, and rethinking ideas of discipline and accountability in both school and the justice systems.

“There’s a deeper crisis of imagination. We have to get out of the mindset where we think justice means punishment and punishment means confinement,” Mr. Hill said during one panel discussion. “So, the work of school is to help us unlearn some of that stuff because that’s sometimes the first place where we learn what justice means.”

As part of a different panel, Ms. Alexander described how while writing “The New Jim Crow,”

she had envisioned not only reducing incarceration rates in the United States but also building movements that would end “this cycle of creating enormous systems of racial and social control in this country.”

“Many of the folks who are building social movements, Black Lives [Matter] and beyond, have a deeply transformational, revolutionary consciousness in their work,” she said. “They don’t necessarily have all the answers, but they are striving to figure out what it means to reimagine what our justice system looks like, reimagine what our education systems look like, rethink how we view democracy on a local level as well as national level. Those kinds of conversations are absolutely essential.”

Dr. T. Elon Dancy II, director of Pitt’s Center for Urban Education and the Helen S. Faison Endowment Chair in Urban Education, said he and other forum organizers had wanted to expand participants’ imaginations about the role and future of education. They decided to generate more national visibility for what historically had been a local conference while supporting Pittsburgh communities that are grappling with the realities of the relationship between school and prison.

Coordinators of the event intentionally invited people and groups that universities usually ignore to enrich everyone’s understanding of the current

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**Dr. T. Elon Dancy II**, director  
University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Urban Education

status of education and where it needs to be to educate for the public good, he explained. They also passed on having a single keynote lecture, opting instead to focus on dialogue between featured panelists and the audience to encourage active engagement and learning based on experience.

“Our attendees were not only teachers and administrators, but we went beyond educational professionals to include youth, parents, activists, artists and academics,” Dr. Dancy said. “The expectation that they talk to each other embraces the values of accountability, truth and critical reconciliation, where researchers and administrators must shape policies and questions in response to the experiences of the most vulnerable populations.”

This approach was one of the reasons the smaller breakout sessions with local community leaders were just as vital to the forum’s goals as the larger plenaries with big names such as Ms. Alexander and Mr. Hill.

For example, a session that looked at the role of grassroots advocacy and activism in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline had a panel that included the Rev. Cornell Jones, group violence intervention coordinator for the City of Pittsburgh and the panel moderator; Jasiri X, a Pittsburgh-based artist and activist, and co-founder of the artist-activist collective 1Hood Media; Evans Moore, Pittsburgh regional

During the University of Pittsburgh Center for Urban Education's summer educator forum, author and journalist Marc Lamont Hill, right center, discusses ways to change education approaches and school systems to prevent the school-to-prison pipeline. He is joined by Columbia Teachers College associate professor Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, left center, and Chicago State University associate professor Crystal Laura, far left, who served as moderator. A sign language interpreter, far right, translated the conversation.

organizer for the national criminal justice reform organization FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums); Amber Sloan, a Homewood community organizer; and Tracey McCants Lewis, deputy general counsel and human resources director for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

During the discussion, the panelists explained how they are trying to address the school-to-prison pipeline based on their different life and work experiences. Ms. Sloan, who had been a gang member as a teen, talked about how she is out in the community getting involved in students' lives and showing how she cares about them. Ms. Lewis said she works with a team of law students to help expunge former offenders' criminal records, which could hinder their future economic opportunities. Mr. Moore described his organization's efforts to eradicate mandatory minimum sentences and advance other sentencing reforms. And Jasiri X described a 1Hood Media program at Shuman Juvenile Detention Center that is helping to raise students' self-worth and stimulate their creativity.

"Pittsburgh is a place where if you're a person of color you can feel unheard, you can feel unseen. Sometimes a child will act out so that we see them and we recognize them—not necessarily that they're bad, but they want to get your attention," Jasiri X said in explaining his group's approach to both working with youth and stemming the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon.

"We try to create an environment where you can get attention using your gifts, skills, talents and creativity. Our piece is about empowering the youth that we work with, letting them know that whatever circumstances you're in or place where you come from, your voice is viable, your voice is important, and you're as much a part of the future of this city as any other person in this city." **h**

has organized a number of edifying inter-school events like "Jeopardy!"-style quiz games and activities inspired by the House Cup competitions from the "Harry Potter" book and movie series.

"It's about building a culture," he explained.

So far, the data is encouraging. In the past two years, total suspensions decreased by 22%, disciplinary referrals in general decreased by 30%, and students' reported perception of safety in the school environment improved by 19%.

In addition, the school saw notable improvements in academic outcomes, with math and language arts scores increasing after trending downward in the previous school year.

"It definitely made a big difference and impact in the school," Aryana said. "Kids have a place to be heard and talk about their problems."

Student leaders like Aryana are selected via a four-step process. First, they have to be recommended by a teacher. Next, the students fill out an application, followed by an interview with Mr. Thomas and current leaders. Students who are selected receive a one-day training on restorative practices from staff at the University of Pittsburgh, learning the skills to intervene and support a positive school culture.

"You're the one who steps up when someone needs to step up," said Devin Walker, a seventh-grader who is one of the leaders. Devin, who plays soccer and Fortnite on the weekends, helps his teacher lead healing circles in homeroom every week.

Mr. Thomas plans to induct 30 new student leaders over the course of the 2019–20 school year. Ten leaders, including Aryana and Devin, will carry over from the most recent school year and assist in the recruitment.

Being a student member of the L.I.T. may come with privileges, but there are responsibilities and pressures as well.

"Being in the leadership group has held me to a higher standard, where teachers labeled me as a leader, which was stressful because people were always making sure I never had a slip-up," Aryana said.

All the same, she credits the program with completely turning around her school experience, and she extends her leadership well beyond the classroom.

In addition to her roles as captain of the school cheer-leading team and as Ariel in the upcoming "Little Mermaid" musical, she also maintains a blog and internet network called "Young Queens in the making," an online group of 56 girls in the Woodland Hills School District that is dedicated to discussing school and life.

“What really motivated me to start my blog was the fact that a lot of girls were going through a lot of stressful situations over this past summer, and I thought it could bring light to show them things will eventually get better,” said Aryana.

While she won’t discuss specific issues out of respect for the group, she said, “We discuss a lot about self-confidence because I have experienced low self-esteem and it still creeps up on me ... We do discuss other things like leadership qualities, being unique, distancing ourselves from drama, health and peer pressure, to name a few.”

While most of the young women in the network are students at Woodland Hills Intermediate, a number have

For Aryana’s mother, the newfound compassion for her peers is the most notable change since her daughter began the Just Discipline program.

“She has matured a lot. She’s more helpful, and more concerned,” Ms. Pullie said. “The leadership program is opening her up, and I’m excited about it.”

Though Aryana has had great success applying restorative practices in her own life, she is by no means immune to the everyday pain and frustration of adolescence.

“She has days where situations overwhelm her and she reacts like a preteen or early teen would,” Mr. Thomas said. “The difference is she holds herself accountable and uses those experiences as a learning tool for the future.”

While he is thrilled with Aryana’s progress and the leadership program in general, he stresses that it’s only one part of a broader reform project that includes every member of the student body.

“The cornerstone of [the Just Discipline Project] is relationship, and some of the biggest success stories are not within the leadership group,” he said. “Yes, Aryana is exceptional, but we have a ton of exceptional students who have progressed through our programming here at Woodland Hills Intermediate.”

The results are heartening enough that Dr. Huguley and his team are in the early phases of planning an expansion of the initiative. “After two years, we feel more confident,” he said.

New sites may include Woodland Hills Senior High School and other school districts in southwestern Pennsylvania, depending on the amount of funding the initiative receives.

Aryana’s mother is all for spreading the program. “A lot of these kids need it,” Ms. Pullie said. “They should start it from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade.”

While the Just Discipline Project may or may not follow her into high school, Aryana said she’s confident that the skills she’s learned will continue to serve her well.

“No matter where we branch out in life, I feel like a lot of people in this program will really take what we’re learning here and do something good with it,” she said. “I’m looking forward to it.” **h**

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**Shawn Thomas**, restorative practice coordinator, Woodland Hills School District

switched schools or gone on to the local high school but continue to actively comment on the blog.

“It’s meant to be a safe place for girls in our community and district, specifically where they don’t have to worry about impressing anybody and can be comfortable in a positive virtual environment,” Aryana explained.

Mr. Thomas noted that the blog provides support to a particularly vulnerable set of the school’s population.

“At this age developmentally, young girls often search for identity in areas that are not so productive,” he said. “Aryana, going through similar challenges, felt the need to help encourage friends and receive encouragement for herself.”