

Highlighting Successes: A Restorative Response to a Traumatic Event

The following case study took place at a high school, serving 120+ students from 9th through 12th grade. Student demographics are as follows:

- *94.3% of students are students of color*
- *65.6 % of students qualify for free or reduced lunch*
- *44.3% of students are English Language Learners*
- *13.1% of students require special education services*

This particular school is a charter school.

What happened?

In 2017, high school students coming back from off-campus lunch reported to their faculty that police were searching them and demanding identification. When the officers finally connected with school leaders, the dialogue was confrontational. School leaders told the officers that the student who they were looking for was not in the building, and the officers could not enter since they did not have a warrant.

When one school employee went behind the building to make sure students had made it safely from lunch, she discovered the building was surrounded by officers with guns drawn. She was put in a squad car so she could not return inside the building and was not allowed to communicate with her colleagues.

Meanwhile, Denver Police Department asked Denver Public Schools Department of Safety to respond to a situation at the charter high school. Denver Police informed the district that they had surrounded the building, and a shooting suspect was inside.

Alarmed by the urgency of the dispatch, multiple DPS officers responded to the school, including the Chief of Safety. Department of Safety officers believed they were responding to a critical incident involving a person with a weapon inside the school. The school leader informed DPS that DPD had not described an imminent safety risk, and that he told responding DPD officers that the student was not present at school. DPS Chief of Safety, recognizing the conflicting information but acknowledging the risk that there could be an armed student on campus, allowed DPD to search the classrooms.

Who was affected?

Students were greatly impacted by this traumatic event. Many had been searched on their way back from lunch simply because of their race or that they had tattoos. Once police entered their classrooms, officers removed select students' hats and took pictures of them, claiming they looked like youth wanted for other crimes. Student attendance plummeted, on some days as low as 25%.

Families were afraid to send their students back to the school for the remainder of the school year. Many families are undocumented, and some are justice-involved. They no longer trusted the school to be able to keep their students safe.

Staff was highly impacted as they experienced the trauma of not being able to protect their students. One had guns pointed at her when trying to ensure students were inside the building after lunch, and then was not allowed to return into the building or communicate with her colleagues. The school leader felt unheard by both the police department and the school district. Other teachers resisted police coming into their classrooms without warrants and, on at least one occasion, were pushed aside by officers.

The school district and police department were also impacted, as they lost the trust of this particular school community and the broader Denver community as the story was featured on local media.

How did the school community take responsibility?

By the time the police had left campus, the school day was over.

Immediately, school leaders brought all staff together for a restorative circle to begin to process these traumatizing events.

Understanding that families and students would struggle to trust the school again, the staff reached out to external community organization to facilitate healing circles with families and students.

How did the school community make things right?

For staff, the school community hosted regular circles for staff to process the events.

For students and families, the community organization facilitated bilingual circles for them to name their fears. Their testimonies were documented and used to communicate the story to the broader community, which helped with the healing process. School staff began a series of intensive home visits for any students whose attendance suffered as a result of the incident.

For the school community as a whole, school staff and students created a presentation for the Denver School Board that they delivered at the next school board meeting, The principal and three students shared their story, talked about the long-lasting impact, and demanded an investigation into the incident. This investigation concluded less than a month later, noting the miscommunication between Denver Public Schools and Denver Police Department and acknowledging the trauma this caused to the school family.

Benchmark 5: Restorative language and culture are established.