

## Highlighting Successes: An Impactful Middle School Circle

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*The following case study took place at a middle school, serving 600+ students from 6th through 8th grade. Student demographics are as follows:*

- *65.3% of students are students of color*
- *52.5 % of students qualify for free or reduced lunch*
- *21.5% of students are English Language Learners*
- *14.8% of students require special education services*

*This particular school is a traditional, public school.*

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### **What happened?**

In the fall of 2017, an 8th grade student (Student A) was lured off campus by some classmates with the promise that they would buy her an ice cream cone at a nearby McDonald's. Another 8th grade student (Student B), who had been driven to the off-campus meeting spot by her mother, assaulted her classmate while 9 other students (Bystanders) filmed the fight and cheered on Student B.

An employee of a local business was forced to leave her desk to break up the fight. After Student B and the bystanders fled the scene, this woman helped clean Student A's wounds and brought her back to the school, where the school administrator was able to call both her grandmother to pick her up and the police department to file a police report.

### **Who was affected?**

Student A was both physically and emotionally distraught. She ultimately chose to transfer schools as a result of the altercation.

The employee of the small business was reached out to by the school. She was especially impacted by the age of the students involved, having a daughter around that same age.

Student B was suspended for the maximum amount of time while the incident was investigated. Both her and her mother had charges pressed against them.

The bystanders were given both lunch intervention and after-school intervention for a week following the incident in order to spend time working with the student services team. Most were pulled from extracurriculars, including leadership groups. Many of their families struggled to understand why their students were being punished just for watching the fight.

As the video of the fight spread across social media, almost every student in the building had watched the video and thus been impacted in various ways.

The Behavior Team tasked with addressing this situation was strained both as far as their capacity to support elsewhere in the school as well as their confidence in the strength of their school culture. They wanted to ensure they intentionally repaired the harm done to the school community, but were frequently met with resistance from the bystander students and their families.

### **How did the school community take responsibility?**

The Behavior Team wanted to ensure that, if at all possible, some learning could come out of this traumatic incident; it was decided that a circle process would be used to unpack the impact of the bystanders on the school community.

In their lunch and after-school intervention time, the bystanders wrote letters home to their parents inviting them to come to the school and participate in a circle to process what had happened. The Behavior Team worked diligently to ensure that they worked through the resistance students and families put up to avoid being part of this process.

In the meantime, the Behavior Team began to plan for the circle. They reached out to the detectives on the case, who agreed to be part of the circle, but also had the school delay the circle until related court-proceedings were over. They considered including Student A in the process, but she and her grandmother were uncomfortable with being part of the circle. The Behavior Team met with every bystander, parent of a bystander, the employee of the small business, and even attempted to include a city councilmember in the circle to demonstrate the far-reaching impact of an incident such as this one.

### **How did the school community make things right?**

Throughout this experience, the messaging to the bystanders was that this moment did not need to define them, but that they needed to understand how to learn from this experience.

The bystanders were pulled from leadership positions in the school and told that, in order to earn these spots back, they needed to present their case to their peers in leadership and explain why they deserved to be part of the group. Most bystanders took advantage of this opportunity and were allowed to continue in these roles by their peers, sometimes under conditions.

On the day of the circle, months after the incident, the Behavior Team, the bystanders and their parents, the small business employee, and the detectives gathered at the school and began by watching the video of the fight. In the room, the Behavior Team felt an immediate impact. Students and parents responded to how watching the fight and hearing their voices made them feel. Every participant responded to the question, "How do we move on from this in a positive way?"

As the school year progressed, the Behavior Team continued to see the impact of this circle. The bystanders went on to spread the word about the impact of their own behavior on the school community. Students, both those directly involved and others, frequently reference the circle as the reason they are bringing concerns to adults in the building before they erupt into something bigger.

Student A eventually returned to the school, having not experienced success at her new school. One bystander, who had been particularly resistant to taking any accountability for his role in the incident, asked the Behavior Team if they could set up a time for him to apologize to her.

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*Benchmark 5: Restorative language and culture are established.*