



School Climate, Discipline, & Safety Learning Journey Summary

Oakland, CA
May 8-10, 2023

AYPF hosted a group of educators, school administrators, policymakers, and researchers to explore school climate, discipline, and safety with a specific focus on reducing inequality and improving the use of research evidence. **An immersive, deeply engaging experience, the Learning Journey allowed participants to see, first-hand, evidence-based policy and practice solutions that create positive, affirming, equitable educational environments for all students.** Participants learned about the problem of punitive practices disproportionately affecting youth of color and those with disabilities and explored research-backed solutions and alternatives.

On the morning of Tuesday May 9th, [Dr. Micere Keels](#) spoke to her research in a presentation titled, **“Advancing School Safety through Trauma-Responsive Educational Practices: Where to Start and How to Move Forward.”** Dr. Keels started by modeling a technical change that teachers can use in the classroom—playing a mindfulness breathing video that calms students and teachers by intentionally slowing everything down for a moment. She then framed the issue of the traditional approach to school safety being heavily based on the presence of police. This has created a reliance on responding to student behavior with harsh, punitive consequences instead of trying to discern and understand the reason behind the behavior, which is often a manifestation of trauma. Dr. Keels underscored that **reliance on police breaks down relationships and connection in schools and is a fast track for Black, Brown, and disabled students into the legal system.** Additionally, the data shows that police in schools often [result](#) in more arrests but do not decrease incidents.

Dr. Keels emphasized that [detection, counselling, and skill building actually creates safety and prevents incidents.](#) So instead of implementing harmful practices, she urges educators to examine, **“[What are we doing to create systems and structures of connection and trust?](#)”** She suggested that schools can start using information gathering of students for support instead of punishment; students are more willing to share information when they know that what they’re sharing will help and not harm another student. She also highlighted the importance of getting adults in schools support for their mental health and wellbeing, so that they can in turn better serve students.

On Tuesday afternoon, we were joined by [Oakland Unified School District](#) (OUSD), who shared about the policies and practices that their school district is implementing to

Informing Youth Policy, Improving Youth Outcomes

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improve school climate and safety. **Dexter Moore, Jr., Ed.L.D.**, Acting Chief of Staff, first **welcomed participants** to Oakland and thanked everyone for being there on behalf of the superintendent and district. Mr. Moore explained Oakland's vision for cultivating joy in the classroom and creating a culture and climate of belonging rooted in Black and Brown excellence.

We subsequently heard from OUSD's community partners: **Dr. Macheo Payne** (Executive Director of Community & Youth Outreach) and **Ebony Sinnamon-Johnson** (Black Sanctuary Organizer at the Black Organizing Project). They gave an overview of the hard work and numerous years it took to create momentum and change that ultimately resulted in the [George Floyd Resolution](#), which began the process of removing police from OUSD campuses. Community members and organizations, especially those with lived experience, are instrumental partners to OUSD as they seek to create a welcoming, supportive environment for all students.

Heather Palin, Director of MTSS, shared OUSD's [Multi-Tiered Systems of Support \(MTSS\) Framework](#). OUSD's MTSS supports a shift of culture to student-centered care, as OUSD wants students in class and in community to learn, instead of being removed from class or school. The year after OUSD fully instituted MTSS, they saw a 30% decrease in referrals for discipline.

Sandee Simmons, LCSW, Behavioral Health Programs Manager, discussed the role of the **Coordination of Services Team (COST)**. COST is a multidisciplinary team of school staff and providers who review the needs of individual students and collaborate on connecting those referred students to resources and interventions to support their academic success and healthy development. **David Yusem**, Restorative Justice Coordinator, shared how [restorative justice circles](#) create community and a safe environment for students. He described the different types of circles OUSD uses, such as repair circles to address harm, grief circles for students who have lost loved ones, re-entry circles that welcome students back to school who have been out of school due to incarceration and suspension, and support circles for student who are slipping academically.

Participants also heard more from OUSD's community-based partners. **Londel Porter**, Executive Director of **Saving Shorty**, discussed how the organization has done street outreach work in West Oakland and is now in the schools, directly working with young people. **Vanessa Floyd-Rodriguez**, Program Analyst at the [Oakland Department of Violence Prevention](#), shared that at 7 campuses in OUSD, there are School-Based Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) Teams. The teams include violence interrupters that know families/students and have a pulse on what is going on, so that they can intervene before anything harmful happens and can respond to prevent retaliation. **Dr. Macheo-Payne** spoke about hiring people re-entering the community following incarceration as [credible messenger mentors](#) in the schools. He shared how their role

has credible messengers has given community members a sense of purpose. He explained that since these credible messengers know the community, they are better equipped to deescalate situations.

We spent Tuesday afternoon in breakout groups discussing what we learned from the research and practice sessions and analyzing how participants could apply that to their school or work. Breakout groups provided participants the opportunity to network, engage in peer-to-peer learning, and explore and discuss policy strategies and solutions.

Wednesday morning began with [Dr. Rachelle Rogers-Ard](#)'s presentation entitled **"Unmasking Anti-Blackness: Revealing the Harmful Effects of Control as Discipline in Schools."** She defined anti-Blackness as systemic racism and discrimination against Black people, often perpetuated through social, cultural, and economic institutions that strips Blackness of value using dehumanization. Dr. Rogers-Ard stated that "masking control as discipline refers to the use of seemingly neutral policies and practice to exert control over students. This often includes policies around dress codes, hair, and behavior, which disproportionately impact Black students and perpetuate anti-Blackness." These policies and practices create a hostile environment that can lead to the disengagement and lower academic achievement of Black students.

Dr. Rogers-Ard explained that [research](#) shows that **Black students are more likely than white students to be referred for disciplinary action for subjective infractions** such as disruption or defiance compared to objective infractions such as tardiness or truancy. **Black students also receive harsher consequences for disciplinary infractions for similar conduct as their white peers.** She underscored that racial stereotyping can influence teachers' decisions to refer a student and administrators' decisions in response to those referrals. Dr. Rogers-Ard shared [research](#) that Black girls received in-school and out-of-school suspensions at rates almost two times their share of total student enrollment. Furthermore, Black boys received both in-school and out-of-school suspensions at rates more than three times their share of total student enrollment—the largest disparity across all race/ethnicity and sex groupings.

Participants then visited [Life Learning Academy \(LLA\)](#), a public charter affiliated with the San Francisco Unified School District. Participants were welcomed by Co-Executive Directors Teri Lynch Delane, PhD. and Craig Miller, who shared that **LLA was founded on the idea of radical love**—that the whole student should be nurtured and supported. LLA believes **"every single kid, no matter who they are, what has happened to them or what they've done, deserves relentless love, accountability, and the chance to make a good life."** Teri emphasized that LLA is able to take a more individualized approach to students as each teacher only has 6-8 students per class. Due to their positive school climate and culture, they have not had an act of violence on campus in the school's 25 years.

Current students then gave participants a tour of their on-campus housing which included bedrooms, bathrooms, a laundry room, a common area for them to bond through game/movie nights, and more. The students also showed participants their classrooms and other meeting/gathering spaces, introduced us to their beloved teachers, shared about their favorite classes, and walked us around their lush garden and spacious chicken coop.

After the tours, students shared the impact that LLA has had on their lives. Many revealed that before LLA, they lacked confidence, direction, and support; now, they are thriving academically and personally and have goals for the future. One student stated, **“I now realize that I wasn’t a bad kid—my needs just weren’t being met before.”** When asked what makes the culture and climate at LLA safe to them, one student expressed that **“Life Learning Academy is not just a community—it’s a family. We eat meals together, laugh together, cry together, and treat this place as our home.”**

Staff accentuated that Life Learning Academy (LLA) **“is helping students write a new script about themselves, what they are capable of, and what dreams they can go after** through academic programming, workforce development, alumni services, and college & career preparation. We help assess what students need, expose them to new opportunities, and help them navigate the barriers posed by unfamiliar systems.” LLA works in partnership with community organizations and colleges to provide whatever students need to succeed in school, work, and life. They seek personalized work opportunities and courses for students based on their interests. LLA offers a college support class to help students develop skills and obtain resources for success. Every day, students who are interested in culinary arts can cook meals for the students and staff. Even after graduation, LLA provides supports and resources for their alumni.

Participants spent the afternoon in breakout groups, discussing what they could do to create a positive school climate and sense of true belonging and safety in their schools. One participant noted that making small changes to how their school operates could go a long way to shifting their culture. Another participant was challenged and motivated by how much outside fundraising LLA does to be able to provide such a welcoming and supportive environment for their students. Everyone ended the day reflecting on the key takeaways from the Learning Journey and the need to continue these conversations as everyone seeks to implement evidence-based policies and practices to improve their schools.

Thank you, Oakland Unified Schools District and Life Learning Academy, for sharing your experiences and insights with us. **Thank you**, Dr. Keels and Dr. Rogers-Ard, for grounding us in the research. **Thank you** to all of our Learning Journey participants for your intentionality, curiosity, and desire to create positive, affirming, equitable educational environments for all students.