

2016-2017

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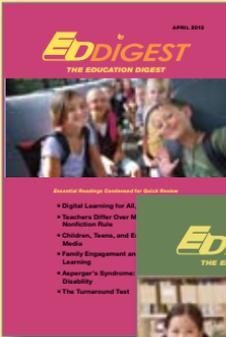
## **Year in Review**



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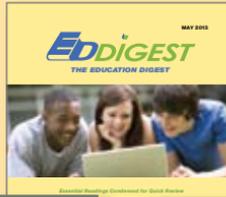
- **Rising Opioid Abuse Puts Pressure on Schools**
- **Alternatives to Workshops**
- **How Mock Trials Bring Learning to Life**
- **Busting the School-to-Prison Pipeline**
- **Great Teachers Are Experts at Difficult Conversations**
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# Measuring the Impact: Rising opioid abuse puts pressure on schools

**BY ERIN McINTYRE**  
From *Education Dive*

When a star football player who had recently graduated from Spring Mills High School in Martinsburg, WV, was found dead after taking “bad opioids,” his former teacher, Jessica Salfia, penned a Facebook note begging the public not to see him as just another statistic in a state associated with drug overdoses.

She wanted the world to know Jorge Armando Mercado-Medrano was a guy who “hated failure, who was always optimistic and believed in his team’s ability to win, who smiled every Friday at me as he walked by my door and asked if I was coming to his game, who should be remembered as someone who

was smart, creative, funny, and kind.”

Unfortunately, in many places, such occurrences are becoming the “new normal.”

A recent report by researchers at Penn State University found heroin and prescription painkiller abuse on the rise, thanks to wider availability. Across the U.S., 28,647 deaths, or 61% of all drug overdose deaths, were linked to opioid use in 2014. Since 2000, the Center for Disease Control reports the opioid overdose rate has tripled, while deaths from heroin overdose have quadrupled over the past decade.

The epidemic’s effects have sent shock waves through American society, and schools and universities have been no exception. The increased demand

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*Erin McIntyre is a contributing writer to Education Dive. Condensed from a July 14, 2016, post on [www.educationdive.com](http://www.educationdive.com). Autumn A. Arnett, editor of Education Dive, contributed to this post.*

## Measuring the Impact

on already taxed districts and colleges to provide increased counseling services, as well as grid against the possibility of such incidents is yet another challenge in the education landscape. The National Institute on Drug Abuse says one in 12 high school seniors reported having tried Vicodin for recreational use. One in 20 reported abusing Oxycontin. And for college aged students, one in 10 reported having a prescription for OxyContin or Vicodin, but 20.2% said they took more than they were supposed to.

The 41st annual Monitoring the Future report, conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Michigan and sponsored by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, found 5.4% of teens used narcotics other than heroin in the past year. Those might include morphine, Oxycontin, Vicodin, or codeine, all of which are addictive opioids and proven gateways to heroin. Half of heroin users report they began by using painkillers. Most cite cost as their motive for switching over to heroin, since the street drug costs about one-tenth as much as prescription painkillers. Beth Mattey, the President of the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), believes it's

important for school districts to recognize the epidemic of prescription drug abuse as a first step towards thinking about prevention and treatment.

“Addiction is a disease, and we need to recognize it as a disease,” Mattey said, noting it can be difficult to get adolescents into treatment.

A 2013 survey from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that while young people perceive heroin to be the most dangerous drug, the number of 12-17-year-olds who see it as “very risky” is on the decline.

However, Monitoring the Future found the use of MDMA, heroin, opioid painkillers, and amphetamines nationwide all declined for 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders in 2015. And the rate of heroin use has fallen by more than half for 10th- and 12th-graders since the year 2000, and has fallen 66% for 8th-graders since 2008.

But in some pockets of the country, opioid use is increasing dramatically.

### **Increased Pressure on Schools**

New England, in particular, has been ravaged. In Vermont, the State Health Department reported an increase of 40% re-

### Key Facts on Behavior in Youth Aged 12-17

- In 2014, 467,000 teens aged 12-17 reported using prescription pain meds, with 168,000 being addicted.
- In 2014, an estimated 28,000 12-17-year-olds had used heroin in the past year, and an estimated 16,000 were current heroin users. An estimated additional 18,000 had a heroin use disorder.
- People often share their unused pain relievers, unaware of the dangers of nonmedical opioid use. Most adolescents who misuse prescription pain relievers are given them for free by a friend or relative.
- The prescribing rates for prescription painkillers to patients in this age group nearly doubled from 1994 to 2007.

lated to the treatment of opioid addicts in 2015. In New Hampshire, drug overdose deaths have increased rapidly, spiking 69% between 2013 and 2014.

Over the last year, two students who attended New Hampshire's Berlin Public Schools overdosed. Both survived. The high school has a heroin usage rate that is reportedly 93% higher than the average for the state's other schools.

Berlin superintendent Corinne Cascadden told *Education Dive* districts need to realize that helping students deal with drug and alcohol issues isn't the responsibility of public schools alone. It takes a multifaceted approach.

"To successfully support students, collaborative partner-

ships must be actively engaged in alternative means of treatment and maintaining recovery for students," Cascadden said. "For years, we have taught prevention skills and will continue to do so, but for a percentage of students, more structured programming and supports must be implemented." Cascadden says she's seen "tremendous stress" on schools to provide "more and more social and emotional services, from adding dental services, after-school programs, fruit and vegetable snacks, and school-based mental health."

"There must be strong partnerships with local agencies to assist in raising the whole child," Cascadden explained. "We are seeing students in elementary grades who were

## Measuring the Impact

either born drug addicted or have substance abuse in the home. These students need many services before they can be ready to learn.”

Next fall, Cascadden’s district will begin a pilot program that involves home visits by school personnel into students’ homes, to better engage parents.

Mattey recommends school systems seek outside resources, like the government-run Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website. She also recommends that K-12 schools embrace a program called Smart Moves, Smart Choices to help inform students about the dangers of prescription drug abuse.

The Smart Moves, Smart Choices website offers free downloadable toolkits for middle and high schools to use, as well as resources for younger learners.

“There is now a component for elementary children as well,” Mattey said. “It helps children understand the importance of taking medication as prescribed and only from a trusted adult.”

### **School-Stocked Antidote**

Berlin is the fifth district in New Hampshire to keep naloxone, a nasal-spray opioid overdose-reversing counter-drug,

on hand. The drug’s manufacturers are partnering with the National Association of School Nurses to provide funding “to increase awareness of opioid-related risks among students, educators, families, and communities.” One case of the nasal spray will also be made available for free to every high school in the U.S.

The program requires a commitment from schools to training SROs and school nurses in how to administer the life-saving nasal spray. Some schools have declined because first responders, who also have access to Narcan, are nearby. Rules and reactions have varied state to state, and even district to district.

Some districts, like Hartford, VT, schools, initially didn’t want to stock Narcan due to liability concerns. Nevertheless, an ongoing increase in drug use and a rash of overdoses later made district officials change course.

Last year, New York updated legislation to allow nurses to administer naloxone in schools without liability; Kentucky laws allow the same. Maine Gov. Paul LePage, however, has twice vetoed legislative proposals related to Narcan in schools, saying that it encouraged a

### **Key Facts on Attitudes of College-Aged Youth (18-25)**

- Nearly 16% of college-aged students said they have used pain pills without a prescription.
- For athletes, the percentage increases to 22.5%.
- 34% of college students said they can easily get prescription pain medications; 49.5% say they can get them within 24 hours.
- 86.6% know the medications can be addictive, but 63% see prescription pain meds as less risky than heroin. 11% have taken something without knowing what it was.
- 30.8% knew of someone who overdosed on opioids—either pills or heroin—but 37.2% said they wouldn't know how to get help in the event of an overdose.
- One in 10 had a current prescription for pain medications, and 20.2% said they took more than they were supposed to.
- 20.2% reported using the pills in excess of the dose prescribed.

false sense of safety in users.

Rhode Island has the most aggressive approach in the country. The state requires Narcan to be available in all middle, junior high, and high schools.

According to the state's health department, 29 children ages 17 and younger were administered Narcan between July 2014 and August 2015, though it was administered just once in a school setting.

Cascadden believes all schools should keep Narcan on hand, just in case. "Who wants to see a student die on

their watch?" she said. "We certainly don't want to bear that tragedy."

Narcan buys time for emergency workers to respond, Cascadden explained, saying that the key is what interventions or measures are in place to support students after they've overdosed and been given Narcan.

And Mattey wants the drug to be available in all schools, saying as the first line of defense in a school setting, school nurses should have access to medication that "can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose."

## Measuring the Impact

She compares the emergency antidote to the emergency use of an EpiPen for an allergic reaction, or the use of an AED in the event of a cardiac emergency.

“If an emergency occurs, school nurses want the tools necessary to save a life,” Matthey said. “Often, in the case of using naloxone to reverse the respiratory depression that occurs, the use of naloxone may be the first step on the way to recovery. I can think of no reason why we should not have a life-saving medication available in the school setting, especially when we know that we have an epidemic and that teens are abusing opioid medication.”

### Looking to Higher Ed

Colleges and universities have also debated keeping Narcan on hand. A June 2015 report by the Hazelden Betty Ford Institute for Recovery Advocacy and The Christie Foundation, 1,600 college-aged youth were surveyed and 16% admitted using pain pills that weren't prescribed to them at least once, with 32% saying that they wouldn't know where to turn in an emergency overdose situation. And 10% of those surveyed reported currently using a pain medication prescribed to them.

At Boston University, campus

police began carrying Narcan back in August 2014, making it the first campus in the nation to supply the antidote.

Others colleges followed suit, including 12 SUNY campuses and community colleges like Sinclair College in Ohio.

And across the country, roughly 60 medical schools have also committed to requiring prescriber education for Narcan, beginning in fall 2016. Such instruction will align with “Prevention Guidelines for Prescribing Opioids for Chronic Pain,” issued by the Centers for Disease Control, and will be required in order to graduate.

In North Dakota, University System Chancellor Mark Hagerott is collaborating with healthcare workers on ways to combat the rising opioid epidemic. This collaboration is just one part of his 2030 plan to address the full spectrum of needs facing students coming through the pipeline into the state's higher education system, he said.

The comprehensive approach to problem solving brings all stakeholders together “in an integrative way ... with a long-term view” and really allows the university system to solve “problems on a human scale,” he said. ►

### **An Ounce of Prevention**

Kuretich said schools can get ahead of the issue by establishing well-developed prevention and education efforts, and having them in place before students arrive at college.

Whittier (ME) Middle School counselor Bonnie Robbins agrees prevention and communication are crucial.

“Words of advice to schools that are starting to deal with the issue of opioid use would be to

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**Schools across the nation are trying to contend with an issue many educators don't feel equipped to handle.**

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educate your staff, students, and families in the dangers of opioid use,” Robbins said. “Don't be afraid to talk about the issue. Don't be judgmental. Build relationships with the students so they are comfortable opening up, especially with the school counselor. Involve local law enforcement, drug agencies, substance abuse counselors to be part of the conversations.”

Some school systems and district administrators have

turned to public awareness campaigns designed to call attention to the issue. In Worcester, MA, a series of 13 individual PSAs in English and in Spanish were broadcast on cable TV and through social media.

### **Moving the Needle**

At the federal level, legislative solutions are also taking shape. The House of Representatives passed 18 bipartisan bills related to creating federal grants, rules, and studies of opioid addiction. The Senate has also approved a comprehensive bill, spearheaded by New Hampshire Senator Kelly Ayotte. And in March, at the National Rx Drug Abuse and Heroin Summit in Atlanta, President Obama announced expanded access to addiction treatment and \$94 million in new funding to 271 Community Health Centers across the U.S., among other steps.

Still, schools across the nation are trying to contend with an issue many educators don't feel equipped to handle, and there doesn't appear to be a widespread consensus on the best way to tackle the issue.

When a student at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth died of an apparent opioid overdose in January, Associate Vice Chancellor for Stu-

## Measuring the Impact

dent Affairs David Milstone addressed the public, saying, “the prescription and heroin abuse epidemic does not discriminate by zip code, educational level, economic status, race, religion, or age. Just as this challenge grips communities across the nation, it affects college campuses as well.”

At UMass Dartmouth, additional counseling services were made available and faculty members were provided resources to help them broach the topic in class. Discussions with student groups to educate them on the perils associated with the ris-

ing epidemic were also held by the office of student affairs, all tactics that are appropriate for students of every age level. But as the country continues to experience a rise in the availability and use of prescription drugs, the resources dedicated to fighting their impact on schools will be re-evaluated.

As Salfia wrote, “It’s time for our communities and schools to actively and aggressively work to protect our young people and fight back against the tidal wave of controlled substances that are so readily available to them.” ■

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# Busting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

How can we change the way we handle student discipline?

**BY JASON LANGBERG  
and ANGELA CIOLFI**  
From *Virginia Journal  
of Education*

Tyler is an economically disadvantaged, African-American 5th-grader with an emotional disability. One day, he gets into a pushing and shouting match with another student during your class. You've got several options for handling the situation. Do you choose to:

- (a) Refer Tyler to the office and recommend he be suspended;
- (b) Report Tyler to the school resource officer;

(c) Separate and reprimand the students, and then continue teaching; or

(d) Something else?

It's not an easy test.

We're hoping you didn't choose option A, and here's why: Students excluded from school are more likely to experience academic failure, mental health problems, substance abuse, gang activity, and justice system involvement, according to research. They're also more likely to drop out. Holding other factors constant (e.g., poverty level), schools with high suspension and expulsion rates have lower test scores and

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*Jason Langberg and Angela Ciolfi are attorneys in the Just Children Program of the Legal Aid Justice Center. For more information: [angela@justice4all.org](mailto:angela@justice4all.org) and [www.justice4all.org](http://www.justice4all.org). Condensed, with permission, from the Virginia Journal of Education, 109 (June 2016), 8-11. Read the article in its entirety at [www.veanea.org](http://www.veanea.org).*

## **Busting the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

graduation rates, and a more negative climate. Ultimately, discipline practices that push students out of school hurt public safety, civic engagement, and the economy. Worse, there is no evidence that suspension and expulsion deter misbehavior or improve school safety.

We don't think Option B is your best bet, either. Excessive contact with law enforcement is associated with increased delinquent activity and less positive school climate, say researchers. And more students today are being sent to court for relatively minor, nonviolent misbehaviors that used to be treated as "teachable moments." In turn, these students are stigmatized and more likely to become repeat offenders. They also face potential out-of-home placement and lifelong consequences that could damage opportunities in postsecondary education, employment, civic participation, and housing.

Options A and B could very well put Tyler on his way to being yet another statistic in the "school-to-prison pipeline." In 2014-15, Virginia public schools issued 123,107 short-term suspensions, 2,922 long-term suspensions, and 388 expulsions to approximately 70,000 students, halting a four-year downward

trend in the statewide suspension rate. Over one-fifth of suspended students were in pre-K through 5th grade. Half of the suspensions were for attendance, cell phones, disruption, defiance, insubordination, and disrespect. Males, African Americans, and students with disabilities made up 51.5%, 23.0%, and 12.3% of the total student population, respectively, but they received 72.9%, 57.5%, and 27.4% of suspensions and expulsions.

Option C is also unwise. School safety and order are supremely important, and students should understand the seriousness of disruptive behavior and face consequences for it.

### **Can Option D Work?**

So, that leaves option D—doing something else. And therein lies the problem. Educators are increasingly expected to do more with less. In an ideal world, Tyler's teacher would have the support, time, and resources necessary to explore the underlying causes and precipitating factors of his misbehavior, to call his parents and/or visit his home, organize a mediation, collaborate with other staff members to develop a behavior plan, and connect

him with school and community resources. Sadly, conditions for students and teachers are far from ideal. Worsening poverty and budget cuts are hurting students, educators, and schools.

Children in poverty have an increased likelihood of food insecurity and malnutrition, physical and mental health problems, substandard housing and homelessness, and neighborhoods with high crime rates, low social capital, and few resources for child development. It's not difficult to see how these conditions could negatively affect a child's behaviors and ability to succeed in the classroom. And child poverty is growing.

As poverty has grown, education funding has declined, becoming even more inadequate and inequitable, and impeding schools' ability to prevent and productively handle misbehavior. Analyses from The Commonwealth Institute (TCI) reveal that from 2009-2014, state funding cuts in Virginia cost public education about \$800 million every year. Taking into account growing student enrollment, the Commonwealth's schools are missing over 11,000 positions, including 4,200 teachers.

Worse, high-poverty school divisions suffered the most from the cuts. After adjusting

for inflation, school divisions serving the highest percentages of students living in poverty experienced per-pupil reductions in state aid almost three times larger than school divisions serving the fewest students living in poverty. The reductions were so much larger in high-poverty areas because the state typically takes on a larger share of the funding than local governments in these areas. Because of these inequities, the Education Law Center gave Virginia an education funding "fairness grade" of F.

Fortunately, the state budget approved earlier this year partially restores some of the funding. Also encouraging is the increasing amount of attention—on the national, state, and local levels—paid to school discipline reform. The U.S. Departments of Education and Justice have convened stakeholders, issued guidance and tools, increased civil rights enforcement, improved data collection, and provided technical assistance.

### **Some Practical Steps**

Here are 10 steps teachers can take to help ensure their schools are both safe and supportive, drawn largely from the U.S. Department of Education, the National Education Associa-

## Busting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

tion, the Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, civil rights organizations, and researchers.

### **1. Adopt a social-emotional**

**lens.** Try to move your thinking from punishment to problem solving and adolescent development. Incorporate social and emotional learning into the curriculum and classroom activities. In other words, teach students self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills. When students misbehave, ask what is fueling the misbehavior (like a functional behavioral assessment in the special education context). (Tip: Check out [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org).)

### **2. Develop trusting, supportive relationships and a sense of community with students and families.** Examples of strategies include:

- a. Being polite and respectful at all times;
- b. Welcoming students at the door every day;
- c. Facilitating “getting to know you” classroom activities, such as ice-breakers, daily morning circles, and sharing autobiographies;
- d. Meeting families before anything bad happens and

starting with positive feedback;

- e. Using multiples lines of communication, such as phone, text, email, social media, daily or weekly logs, positive notes home, newsletters, and home visits;
- f. Learning more about students than just their academic performance and behavior, including their strengths, cultural background, family life, and interests outside of school;
- g. Coordinating events, such as celebrations, town hall meetings, and retreats; and
- h. Arranging translation and interpretation when necessary.

### **3. Establish clear, simple, fair, and high behavioral expectations.** Consider involving students in developing these community norms. State the expectations in a positive manner. Next, teach students and have them practice the expectations. Then, consistently enforce the expectations and consequences. Focus on rewarding positive behaviors. (Tip: Check out [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org).)

### **4. Ensure that curriculum and instruction are rigorous, relevant, engaging, and in-**

**teractive.** When students are focused in the classroom, enjoy learning, and succeed academically, they are significantly less likely to be disruptive. (Tip: Check out MyTeachingPartner, developed by the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education.)

- 5. Pursue relevant professional development opportunities,** such as training in implicit bias, culturally responsive classroom management, restorative practices, and trauma-informed care.
- 6. Utilize (and perhaps even create) alternatives to suspension and referrals to law enforcement,** such as loss of privilege, reflective essays, parent-teacher conferences, apology letters, restorative justice, community service, counseling, and Saturday school. Become familiar with and refer families to resources in the community. Use referrals to administrators and security personnel as a last resort.
- 7. Collect and analyze disaggregated discipline data for your school.** Data for each school can be found on the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection websites. Track data

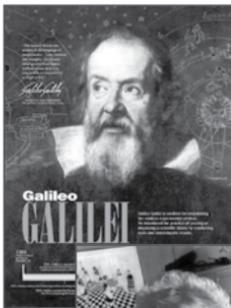
for your own classroom and reflect on your own practices. Ask yourself: "Who am I referring to the office at the highest rates and for what behaviors?" "Am I treating my students equitably?" and "What can I do differently?"

- 8. If your school has high rates of suspension and referrals to law enforcement, and/or high disparities in such harsh disciplinary measures, form a group to explore potential causes and solutions.** Potential causes may include limited resources to respond to students' needs and manage classroom behaviors, discipline philosophies of individual teachers or administrators, punitive written policies, implicit bias, and lack of awareness of the harmful consequences and ineffectiveness of suspension and referral to law enforcement. Create a group work plan that includes educating others about the issues and involving a variety of stakeholders, including students and parents.
- 9. Get involved in systemic change.** Advocate at the local and state levels for candidates and public policies that support students, teachers, and public schools.

## Busting the School-to-Prison Pipeline

**10. Don't be afraid to ask for support!** It takes a village to create safe and supportive schools. Haim Ginott, a famous educator, psychologist, and author, once wrote, "Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task." Helping all of the Tylers in your classroom

and taking on even just a couple of these recommendations may seem like another impossible task for which you are ill-equipped. Yet, teachers across the country have become leaders in the movement to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. Please join them. We can't afford to lose any more of our precious children. ■



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# Breaking the Silence

A growing coalition is working to support and give greater voice to students with incarcerated parents.

**BY TROY FLINT**

*From California Schools*

It had been a year since Dennis Danziger had last seen John, the most talented writer in his English class at Venice High School. Now, the teacher and former sitcom writer was making the long trip up Interstate 5 to reunite with a favorite student. Danziger had taken a special interest in John, pushing him toward college and asking his coworkers to monitor his progress, make sure he stayed on track. So, it was bittersweet—more bitter than sweet—when Danziger sat down across from his prized pupil.

“The guy waiting for me, John, who had been one of my favorite students ever, had been

inside for a year. I was just six feet away and I didn’t recognize him,” Danziger recalled. “He had lost a tremendous amount of weight. I was actually asking him certain questions to make sure who he was.”

Twelve months into a 22-year sentence for drunkenly shooting a man in the shoulder, John had shed his boyish fat and exchanged any semblance of a normal adolescent life for a thoroughly adult existence. New Folsom Prison has that effect on people; it’s a transformative experience of the most unpleasant kind. Though John’s appearance had changed dramatically, he retained his connection to Venice High.

When Danziger returned home, he received a letter from

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*Troy Flint is the California School Boards Association’s senior director of communications. Condensed, with permission, from California Schools, Summer 2016, published by the California School Boards Association. Read the complete article at [www.csba.org](http://www.csba.org).*

## Breaking the Silence

John, who asked him to read the letter to his class. Next week in class, he read the letter: “Dear Student, I sat in his classroom a year ago and now I’m doing 22 inside. The only thing I ever promised my mother was that she would see me walk across the stage and now she’ll never have that and who knows if she’ll ever see me alive again. So do what your teachers say.”

The words sat heavily in the air and then an unlikely voice rang out.

“This one lady with a 0.0 average who just slept the whole time sat up and talked,” Danziger recalled. “No one had ever heard her speak. She said, ‘My brother is in New Folsom’ and she talked and talked and there was this link between the letter I read from John and what she had to say.”

That night, Danziger relayed the story to his wife, Amy Friedman, who responded, “Let’s start a club!” That gave birth to Pain of the Prison System (POPS), a nonprofit organization that supports high school students who have a connection to an incarcerated loved one or have themselves been incarcerated. POPS began with just six students in a Venice High classroom and now has seven affiliates (six in California and

one in Minnesota). It’s the only school-based program of its kind in the country. Friedman is committed to establishing POPS clubs in schools nationwide, a quest that has roots in her own biography.

“In the 1990s, I was a newspaper columnist who went into prison [on a writing assignment] and fell in love with a prisoner and raised his children. My girls were very young when their father went to prison and pre-adolescent and young teenagers when they came into my life,” Friedman recalled.

“They never spoke of their father and where he was. They became world class liars as a result and really struggled in school and socially because of their secret. This secret came from them having been stigmatized when they were younger and believing people would judge them. I saw that by carrying around this secret, they were hurting themselves. They’re in their 30s and still carry this around.”

### Parental Incarceration

Friedman’s daughters are far from alone. The current rate of imprisonment is roughly four times higher than in 1970 and more than 2 million people are currently incarcerated in the

United States. About 3 million children in the U.S. have an incarcerated parent—a figure which doesn't include those in local jails. Christopher Wildeman, associate professor of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University and senior researcher at the Rockwell Foundation Research Unit in Copenhagen, Denmark, began to explore the effects of parental incarceration in 2006.

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**About 3 million  
children in the U.S.  
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parent.**

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“I became interested in parental incarceration through my interest in family inequality. I read a lot of the research and it highlighted neighborhood conditions, family structure, and social class, but really little of it talked about contact with the criminal justice system,” Wildeman explained. “That seemed like a big oversight given what I knew about the consequences of incarceration. I poked around thinking there should be some big research literature that looks at the family impacts of incarceration, but there wasn't

much there. I decided to fill that in to get a better sense of how this life experience affects some of the most vulnerable kids we have in educational institutions.”

Wildeman found that the negative impact of parental incarceration was even more severe than he expected initially, with an incarcerated father roughly doubling the risk of homelessness for a child. He also identified a strong connection between parental incarceration and gaps in student health and academic outcomes, which he documented in a book with Rutgers University-Newark Professor Sara Wakefield. *Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality* shows that the rate of parental imprisonment generally has skyrocketed and that racial disparities in parental incarceration rates are growing and a significant source of social inequality.

One in 40 white children born in 1978 went on to have a parent imprisoned. For white children born in 1990, just 12 years later, the figure was one in 25. For black children born in 1978, the rate of parental imprisonment was one in seven; by 1990 the rate had jumped to one in four. And among black children born

## Breaking the Silence

in 1990 to high school dropouts, more than half (50.5%) had a father imprisoned. As *Children of the Prison Boom* describes it, “These estimates, robustness checks, and extensions to longitudinal data indicate that parental imprisonment has emerged as a novel—and distinctively American—childhood risk that is concentrated among black children and children of low-education parents.”

“What was surprising to me was just how much higher rates of parental incarceration, combined with these negative individual level effects, exacerbated racial inequality in child well-being,” Wildeman said. “So, depending on the outcome or set of outcomes, mass incarceration increased racial disparities in school well-being between 10% and 60%. When we think about one factor that affects racial inequality, that’s a pretty big one.”

Overall, 45% of incarcerated parents are black, 28% are white, and 21% are Latino, but the impact of incarceration is not limited to the imprisoned and their families. Holly Foster, associate professor of sociology at Texas A&M and John Hagan, the John D. MacArthur Professor of Sociology and Law at Northwestern University have been studying

the effects of parental incarceration since 2007. When asked for their most significant findings, they cited the link between parental incarceration and social exclusion and the negative impact of parental incarceration on educational outcomes—even for students whose parents aren’t imprisoned.

“Parental incarceration leads to children’s social exclusion in late adolescence and early adulthood through the mechanism of education. If these students were given the support to attain higher levels of education, their social exclusion may be prevented,” Foster and Hagan wrote in an email. “Also, schools with higher concentrations of incarcerated fathers lead to lower education among children who themselves have an incarcerated father, as well as among students who don’t have a father incarcerated.

“This work speaks to the phenomenon of ‘spillover effects’ and suggests parental incarceration is a social problem that has broad-reaching implications for students.”

While the effects of parental incarceration are profound, they are not equally distributed. Parental incarceration has severe consequences for educational behavior and health

that are often concentrated in low-income and heavily minority neighborhoods. Youth who have experienced parental incarceration are at higher risk for depression, anxiety, obesity, and asthma. Similarly, a 2015 study published in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* showed that youth with incarcerated parents are more likely to exhibit developmental delays and attention deficits.

“Children suffer when they have a parent incarcerated, but not all children suffer in the same way and the deleterious consequences of parental incarceration are stronger for some groups of children than other children,” said Kristin Turney, associate professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine and author of “The Unequal Consequences of Mass Incarceration for Children.” Turney adds, “Children who are racial and ethnic minorities and poor children are more likely to experience parental incarceration. Therefore, just because more of these children are exposed to parental incarcerations, parental incarceration may increase racial/ethnic and social class inequalities in educational outcomes.”

While there is no easy answer to this societal problem, sup-

port programs can be the start of a broader solution.

### **Support Programs**

“A good example is Pains of the Prison System, Turney says. “They are creating a supportive space for children affected by parental incarceration.”

POPS has earned a wealth of media coverage, hosted visitors from the *Los Angeles Times* and National Public Radio, and even seen its students visit the White House as youth ambassadors.

“It is amazing. They bring in incredible people; they write and do a lot of poetry. Then end up taking what could be a negative and channel it toward the positive,” said Venice High Principal Oryla Wiedoeft. “I look at the kids and think, ‘I would never know your dad is in jail because you have it so together.’ It’s all about being super constructive and giving the kids a safe place to talk and challenge their feelings.”

At the outset, POPS had three basic principles: meet at lunch to make the club available to everyone and to bond over the breaking of bread; adhere to the rule that no one has to say why they’re attending; and incorporate an art-based component to promote creative and cathartic expression.

## Breaking the Silence

“It was magical from the get-go,” Friedman remembered. “The very first day, the very first meeting, this little 10th-grader walks into the room and takes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and sits down. Then the second girl walks into the room and they’re both 10th-graders and they go—‘you?!’ These two girls had been friends since kindergarten and hang out together and never knew that they both had parents who were incarcerated. It created this incredible bond.”

Encouraged by the early returns, Friedman quickly looked to expand the program to other schools, but met with resistance. “People say that we don’t have that population; I say that’s just not true. My girls always thought they were the only ones and I knew damn well that wasn’t true. The other response is ‘we don’t want to target that population.’ Well, you’re not targeting them, you’re not forcing people to join. It’s not like ‘go get counseling.’”

Far from being forced, some of POPS’s biggest advocates have reached out to Friedman and Danziger for help in starting programs at their own schools.

Another major change agent in the crusade to support youth

with incarcerated parents is Project! WHAT!, a Bay Area-based group. WHAT! stands for “We’re Here and Talking” and the people doing the talking are students. The program uses youth who have experienced parental incarceration to develop curriculum and facilitate trainings aimed at improving policies and services for peers experiencing the same hardship and adults who want to learn more about the needs of this population.

Project WHAT! takes its inspiration from the Incarcerated Parents Bill of Rights that was created at San Francisco State University. The group has two cohorts, one in Oakland that’s focused more on presentations and lobbying and another in San Francisco that emphasizes campaign work. Project WHAT! candidates fill out applications with essay questions designed to measure their commitment and suitability for a job which can involve door-to-door canvassing, counseling, meeting facilitation, political advocacy, and policy analysis. The youth team members on the review committee evaluate the responses with a matrix that emphasizes important qualities like respect and capacity for teamwork. Those who make the grade participate in a summer orientation before

being deployed to the field when school starts in the fall.

“They get people to think about children,” said Alisha Murdock, a peer mentor for Project WHAT! and a program alumna. “Our main goal is to raise awareness about something that’s never talked about. We’re starting a conversation about how to start a conversa-

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**“We’re starting  
a conversation  
about how to start  
a conversation  
with students of  
incarcerated parents.”**

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tion with students of incarcerated parents.”

That conversation is about to get a lot bigger thanks to an expanded partnership between Project WHAT! and the San Francisco Unified School District. In March, the San Francisco USD Board of Education resolved to assess its curriculum in order to determine how the district can better serve the needs of students with incarcerated parents. Project WHAT! helped write the resolution which, among other items, could result in standard-

ized training for district staff and the introduction of videos and literature that sensitize adults to the plight of students experiencing parental incarceration.

“As far as I know, we’re the first school district to develop a specific policy or plan to support school districts with incarcerated parents. The students themselves felt heard and valued and that’s a huge part of why we did this,” said San Francisco Unified School Board President Matt Haney. “We wanted to communicate that their schools are on their side, and to the extent that they haven’t been, we want to work with them to address that.”

Haney introduced the resolution along with Vice President Shamann Walton after participating in a Project WHAT! training session for SFUSD counselors, social workers, and support staff in 2015. Impressed by what he saw, Haney requested a report from district staff on what they knew about youth with incarcerated parents and the services that SFUSD offered the population.

“What came out of that was a clear need to do more and to build on and expand the efforts that had already started. We met with students from Project

## Breaking the Silence

WHAT! and heard about their experiences, their needs and some of the ways in which their schools could better understand them. We then consulted organizations that work with students with incarcerated parents and put together a set of policies and approaches to address this population and their unique set of needs.”

One recurring theme was that misunderstandings about students with incarcerated parents created barriers to learning and participation and feelings of stigma and exclusion. The students agreed that if school staff follow best practices on how to discuss the issue, identify resources, and facilitate communication, better academic and social experiences would result.

“When a child comes to school and says I saw my dad hit my mom last night, the teacher knows what to do and can offer them resources,” Murdock said. “With incarcerated parents, they hear ‘Oh, my mom just went to jail’ and they don’t know how to deal with that when it should be ‘Maybe you should email this person, contact Project WHAT!, or go to camp at Project Avary.’ One of the biggest things is making sure teachers know how to deal with it.”

The first step toward deal-

ing with parental incarceration is identifying the affected students. Castaic Union School District Trustee Victor Torres explained that this is an under-recognized challenge that districts need to address more aggressively. Torres compared it to the way in which foster youth and homeless students were often overlooked and underserved before their designation as groups requiring additional support in California’s new school funding system.

“The jail is right there in Lancaster. Our parents from L.A. get convicted, end up going to that jail, and the families move up to my area,” Torres said.

California Inspector General Robert Barton notes that’s a common occurrence in a state the size of California where prisoners are often located far from home. His office, which is responsible for providing oversight of 10 different aspects of state prison operations, encourages visits from loved ones in part because he sees them as a key to rehabilitation.

“It’s important because everyone has a different trigger that causes them to change and often it’s their children. They don’t want them to follow in their footsteps; they want to be a better example and get out

and provide for them. You can't measure the impact of incarceration without taking into account the children outside. And to a large extent, those children are a forgotten demographic."

Torres is pushing for solutions to support students in his district who are experiencing parental incarceration, an effort that is challenging at the most fundamental level.

### **Identifying Students**

"One of the most significant problems we have with this population is not being able to identify them because it's not one of those social norms where people say 'my husband's in jail and that's why we're here.' These students have a traumatic experience in their lives that goes unknown, so it's not until after the kid is acting out or gets into trouble that some of these things come to the surface."

Torres advocates opening the lines of communication and working with families to remove the stigma of parental incarceration in the hopes that greater transparency will aid school districts in supporting students with incarcerated parents. He is also exploring the idea of an after-school program that focuses more on socialization than academics, to relieve

some of the burden on parents and reduce the feelings of exclusion that are often a product of parental incarceration. That approach aligns with the one recommended by Cornell's Wildeman who, noting the financial impact of an incarcerated parent, suggests extended child-care and programs that defray expenses for the remaining parent as valuable supports.

"Mentoring programs can do a lot of good, but if schools wanted to design an intervention, I'd push them beyond that toward interventions that support the primary caregiver who's left behind," Wildeman said. "When you talk to folks who have family members in prison, you tend to hear about things that could diminish their costs a little bit and they tend to talk about time constraints and the stigma of incarceration and not wanting people to know."

Similarly, Foster and Hagan recommend that school districts supplement mentoring programs with an investment in academic programs for students experiencing parental incarceration to help ensure high school completion and preparation for college success and consider funding scholarships that would help offset economic disadvantages.

## Breaking the Silence

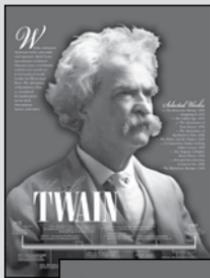
All researchers agree that further investigation is needed to determine how to facilitate better outcomes for youth with incarcerated parents.

“As a first step, school boards and elected officials could be particularly helpful by facilitating and allowing access to schools to study this pressing social problem,” Foster and Hagan wrote. “More detailed data on how parental incarceration effects work would allow researchers to better understand the types of programs that need to be introduced to ensure all students succeed.”

In the meantime, the tried-

and-true method of letting students know that adults and educators care for them comes highly recommended from those who have been through the struggle and come out the other side.

“When I was in 6th grade, no one asked me what was going on when I started missing school; none of my teachers paid attention,” said Murdock. “Something as simple as asking if someone is OK makes a difference. Just asking the question opens the child up to all different kinds of possibilities. Let children know it’s OK to talk about and give them their voices back.” ■



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# Alternatives to Workshops

No professionals say, ‘I became great at my work by attending workshops.’  
Why do we treat teaching differently?

**BY KENNETH BAUM  
and DAVID KRULWICH**  
From *Chalkbeat New York*

Try this: Find a few friends or relatives who have a variety of professional careers. Start with people who have been successful for some time, and proud of the work they do. Ask them how they became good at their jobs.

With virtually every professional other than an educator, you will hear strikingly similar answers:

*I became great at my job because of my mentor. I worked on her team for the first two years. She taught me what to focus on and how to generate my best work. She helped me think through difficult issues, pushing me to produce work of much higher quality than I otherwise would have.*

You will hear a lawyer, for example, explain that he handled cases on teams. The junior associate on the team wrote the first draft of briefs, and a senior attorney edited it, rewrote parts

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*Kenneth Baum is the founding principal of the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science, the Bronx, NY, and is now an education consultant. David Krulwich is principal at the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science. Baum and Krulwich are authors of the book *The Artisan Teaching Model for Instructional Leadership: Working Together to Transform Your School*, available from ASCD. Condensed, with permission, from an August 15, 2016, post on Chalkbeat New York, a nonprofit news organization committed to covering efforts to improve schools for all children. To read the article in its entirety, visit [chalkbeat.org](http://chalkbeat.org).*

## Alternatives to Workshops

thoroughly, and improved it substantially. Only then did the firm send the brief to the client and submit it to the court.

You will hear a doctor who completed rounds at the hospital for several years, while the experienced doctors on her team corrected her mistakes and explained anything she did wrong.

There are also some answers that you'll never hear from a highly talented professional:

- “I became great at my work by attending workshops or training sessions.”

- “I became great at my work because my boss visited once a week for 15 minutes and then rated me with a rubric and gave me a next step.”

- “I became great at my job by analyzing data that measured my results daily and weekly.”

Yet these answers represent the most common strategies schools currently use to develop teachers.

Consider annual evaluations. Doctors and lawyers are evaluated, promoted, and earn pay increases based on their performance. But these assessments are typically done to provide information about status and areas for growth. They are not considered a central part of the employee's training. The real

training happens during the completion of the work itself.

Of course, a doctor might attend a training to learn how to use a new medical device. But this is targeted training to provide specific content knowledge. Training sessions are not considered the mechanism for the fundamental development of a professional.

Similarly, data analysis is important in many fields. We look at athletes' statistics, success rates of hospital procedures, and crime rates for police precincts. But that work is done by central administrators to decide how to allocate funds and how to make bigpicture changes.

The current trend in education is to talk constantly about the need for teachers to use data—giving students pre-assessments, setting goals, giving interim assessments, setting goals again, reanalyzing, and reassessing. We are losing valuable time when students could be doing engaging work and teachers could be collaborating on improving their craft. Other professions recognize that data is not, itself, a mechanism for improvement. How did educators in the United States reach a point where we are, incongruously, using a completely different set of practices to help

adults learn to be great than in any other field?

Our contention is that schools in the United States developed over many years as institutions where teachers work largely in isolation.

In reality, teaching is no more solitary than any other job. Classrooms can be shared; lessons can be written in groups; curriculum can be designed as a team; discipline and data can be analyzed as a normal course of the daily work of the team; colleagues can routinely watch each other work, as a part of a team that maintains the quality collectively for all children they serve.

New teachers can write first drafts of lessons, while the master teacher on the team can edit, modify, and correct the mistakes. The work of a school could have been designed to be done collaboratively in groups. But it wasn't.

Recently, many educators have attempted to solve this problem.

By scheduling a weekly training session after school, and still not collaborating to plan tomorrow's lesson, we've simply added a Band-Aid. Same with providing two hours of "mentoring" from a teacher in a different grade, when this men-

tor doesn't work collaboratively with you on any of the work you normally do. And we add yet another Band-Aid by scheduling a meeting after school to analyze data trends, although the data analysis isn't a part of the work you really need to do that day.

### **Teamwork**

All of this means we are often putting new groups of adults in a room, at the same time, to do new work. Calling it "collaboration" doesn't make it so.

At the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science in the South Bronx, we've been trying a different way.

A small group of adults—three or four is best—should work as a team toward a common goal, like educating a group of 7th-graders in social studies. They should write the lessons, edit and improve their work as a team, organize and decorate their classrooms, strategize about how to work with challenging students, analyze data when they review student work every day. More experienced teachers serve as mentors for the newest team member while they do all of this daily work.

This is how we foster greatness everywhere, by working closely in small groups that

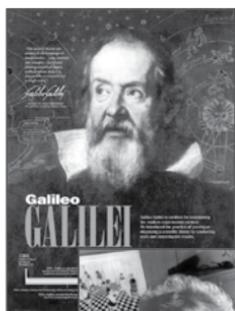
## Alternatives to Workshops

include someone whose work is already great. Artisans teach their apprentices. Apprentices work alongside artisans for years while they hone their craft.

We contend that schools need to stop adding more new work for teachers to do in newly created groups and partnerships in an artificial attempt to create “collaboration” and, instead, reorganize the real

work teachers already need to do every day, creating authentic teams.

It is easy to miss the distinction. Training sessions and feedback cycles appear to involve teachers “working together,” just as teams appear to function in other professions. But one is collaborative and one isn't. We believe understanding this begins the path to improving teaching. ■



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# Confronting Student Suicide

**BY GLENN W. "MAX" MCGEE**

*From School Administrator*

My cell phone startled me awake around 2:15 A.M. "This cannot be good," I thought. It was not. But I never fathomed how bad it could be.

The police chief related that a 16-year-old high school student had died by suicide. This death followed the suicide of a 19-year-old recent graduate just two weeks earlier. Being new to the Palo Alto, CA, Unified School District, I had not met either student, yet I was devastated.

In schools I'd previously led, we had lost children to cancer and fatal accidents, but somehow this felt worse. The specter of death by suicide was beyond comprehension.

Research indicates that one suicide often triggers another. Our deepest fears came true

over the next few months as this death was followed by another. And another. The suicides of four teenagers in this high-achieving community shook us all to the core.

I had been a superintendent since 1988, serving in three local school districts and as state superintendent in Illinois, president of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, and founding head of the Princeton International School of Mathematics and Science, and I had seen my share of crises. But nothing was as tragic or intense as the suicide cluster I experienced during my first months as Palo Alto's superintendent in 2014.

## **In the Aftermath**

Applying lessons learned from an earlier suicide cluster in the district in 2009, we im-

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*Glenn W. "Max" McGee is superintendent of Palo Alto (CA) Unified School District. Condensed, with permission, from School Administrator, 73, (September 2016), 18-28. Published by the AASA, The School Superintendents Association, [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org).*

## Confronting Student Suicide

mediately applied prevention and intervention protocols, including comprehensive anti-bullying, sexual harassment, and homework policies. Counselors developed detailed logic models with clear accountabilities. We wrote a strategic plan with a key goal of “support[ing] the social-emotional needs of students and celebrat[ing] personal growth across multiple dimensions, while ensuring a positive, safe, and healthy environment.”

Attending to mental health and wellness had always been a priority of the district. Following the suicides, it was *the* priority.

After each death, we implemented a “postvention” protocol. My first calls were to the school’s principal, the district’s communications coordinator, and each school board member. The communications coordinator and principal prepared a written message for staff, students, and parents.

We also informed our PTA Council president and the district’s director of student services, who in turn worked with the principal to deploy the crisis team. I approved the messages sent simultaneously to staff and families. Each included resources for mental health supports.

The crisis team met at the school to plan for the coming days. Additional counseling services were obtained from other schools and the community. Experts in grief counseling gave the faculty insights into what to expect from students and how to respond. We scripted a common message for faculty members to read during first period and encouraged them to provide space for discussion, grief, and coping. We asked them to hold off on homework and tests for a day or two and then ease back into the routine.

The biggest challenge of postvention was the depth and breadth of emotions and time needed to transition from shock to a normal routine. Although most students and staff needed just a day or two of grieving, some teachers and counselors needed personal leaves or left the district entirely.

### Unexpected Targeting

We had learned a lot from the earlier cluster, but it was not enough. We had not anticipated how intense the finger-pointing would be. The immediate reaction of many terrified parents was to blame the schools: too much homework, too much competition, uncaring teachers, lack of leadership, depress-

ing books in literature classes, dreary wall colors.

Some educators and parents pointed fingers at other parents: too many “tiger parents,” too much emphasis on GPAs and APs, too much competitive intensity about getting into top universities, too much overprotectiveness.

We were all quick to point fingers at the community as well: too much affluence, too much competition, too much financial stress, too few hospital beds, too many fast trains, too much media attention.

And then there was the cyberbullying of teachers, parents, education leaders, and even students in the anonymous blogs and comments on published articles. While fingerprinting was to be expected, the vitriol was not. Any school that experiences a student suicide should brace for a tsunami of blame that can feel like a wave of destruction. However, advanced preparation can mitigate the deleterious impact.

### Lessons Learned

Eventually, cooler heads prevailed. We learned much more about suicide prevention over the course of the cluster and in its immediate aftermath.

We learned firsthand from

national experts on adolescent suicide, such as Columbia University’s Madelyn Gould and Morton Silverman of the JED Foundation, Stanford professors Shashank Joshi and Rebecca Bernert, and community partners, including pediatricians and psychiatrists at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Lucille Packard Children’s Hospital, and the Health Care Alliance for Response to Adolescent Depression. We learned from sleep research compiled by the American Academy of Pediatrics and from popular literature, including Francis E. Jensen’s *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults*. Thanks to our county health director, we obtained the services of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in conducting an Epi-Aid investigation of risk factors within the community and across the county.

We also learned from students and their parents. We conducted numerous student focus groups and parent forums and surveyed both groups extensively. From all of these sources our key learnings about suicide prevention were:

- **The crucial role of partnerships.** One should never go it alone. Engage the help of

## Confronting Student Suicide

experts in the field of mental health broadly and suicide prevention specifically.

- **The importance of sleep.**

Sleep deprivation had been a common element in some of the deaths.

- **The prevalence of depression.** Our community pediatricians provided evidence that approximately 25% of students had significant mental health concerns.

- **The importance of vigilant students.** The students are essential experts in identifying behavior changes or worrisome social media posts among their peers and letting adults know of potential problems. Provide them with evidence-based depression education.

- **The role of the “suicide hotspot.”** Palo Alto has what the experts call a *hotspot*—in our case, a speeding train that runs through town 90 times per day. The train track is our hotspot equivalent of the Golden Gate Bridge. Eliminating, or at least restricting, the hotspot as a means of suicide is an effective prevention measure. Three of the four students in the recent cluster—and all of those in an earlier cluster—died at or near main train crossings in town.

***We learned this about intervention:***

- **The need to destigmatize counseling.** This stigma needs to be addressed, especially among parents who became successful on their own and believe it is weak or shameful for a young person to seek help for a mental health concern.

- **The need for community mental health services.** Students must have access to hospital beds when the critical need arises and to proper outpatient services for ongoing care.

- **The need to break down health insurance obstacles.** These barriers keep students from much-needed medication, counseling, and services by medical professionals.

***And we learned this about postvention:***

- **The news media is ubiquitous and relentlessness.** The competition to break the latest story can be fierce. We insist the media outlets follow our guidelines about reporting responsibly.

- **The need for broad and deep supports.** These are not just for students and parents, but also for teachers, counselors, and principals.

- **The need for parent education.** Education to promote understanding of mental health issues must be available to all parents in their language. ▶

### Knowledge into Action

These are some of the actions the school district took based on our experiences:

- **Immediate intervention.**

The district took decisive action to hire a mental health specialist for each high school and to increase funding for the culturally focused and community-based organizations, such as Asian Americans for Community Involvement and Adolescent Counseling Services. We worked with the city and county to ensure that students had access to emergency support and mental health beds.

- **Postvention.** The school and community responded with numerous parent and community forums, facilitated by mental health experts for listening and sharing resources for community health support. We also conducted student focus groups and extensively surveyed parents and students.

We let the students mourn and facilitated grief support. We supported their desire to hold memorials, but—walking the fine line between not glamorizing death by suicide and the need for students to vocalize their feelings—we insisted the memorials be held off campus.

We immediately increased counseling supports for mental

health and wellness promotion and began messaging to remind parents and students of the importance of sleep and the dangers of the performance arms race—the relentless drive for the highest GPA and most resumé-building activities.

We provided release time for high school teachers to engage in professional learning about self-care and wellness promotion and to direct students in mindfulness activities. The high schools sponsored a series of awareness events and students themselves led themed activities known as “Changing the Narrative” and “Titan Strong” that gave students a forum in print and social media for sharing positive stories of hope and resilience. The students’ self-initiated actions, including chalk art and youth forums, made a tangible difference, as did their vigilance in looking out for one another.

Parent education workshops sponsored by our PTA Council and Asian Parent Association played a positive role in both understanding the issues and dialing back the academic pressure of the performance arms race. Community leaders, school board members, and city and school staff revitalized Project Safety Net (PSN) ([www.](http://www.)

### Managing My Own Emotions

“Put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping those in need of assistance” advises every flight attendant during the pre-takeoff presentation on flight safety. I should have asked our faculty to do the same, and I regret that in those first few hours and days we did not attend to the emotional needs of our teachers, some of whom had experienced suicides in the community five years earlier.

Following one of the deaths, school district leaders, the high school principal, crisis team, and community support services held a meeting with the school’s faculty to communicate the plan for working with students that day. While the crisis team had met previously to draw up the process, the faculty had not, and the emotions were palpable and raw. I knew that much more than a script and tactical plan were needed for our teachers.

The suicide was traumatic for many, and they needed care that we were not prepared to offer and sadly had not considered that first morning after. Weeping, seething but suppressed anger, and silent cries for help were manifest. So was the compassionate support for one another and the courage to carry on to support the students. Instead of recognizing and honoring their grief, I urged them to suppress their pain and take care of our students. The faculty carried on heroically with our students, but had district and school leaders been more sensitive to their needs and allowed time for the teachers to manage their own feelings and support their colleagues, we would have better served our students and community.

### Personal Impact

Managing my own emotions had its own challenges. Each phone call from the police left me breathless and suffocating just thinking about the child’s parents and siblings, not to mention my own children and grandchildren. There were times of what novelist Kurt Vonnegut called “Jupiter gravity” when I could barely shuffle through the day, yet I always had to keep an upbeat presence.

And shortly after each death, I just got angry. Really angry, but not at anyone. I was just mad that I could not save their lives, that suicide was so inextricable, and terrified that another could happen. My outlets were holding family close and hard exercise—long swims and cycling steep grades. These activities speeded recovery and helped me lead with more compassion, sensitivity, and equanimity.

Putting the proverbial oxygen mask on yourself first is an important lesson in leadership.

— Max McGee

psnpaloalto.com), an organizational network of city, school, and community leaders and doers dedicated to fostering youth well-being and suicide prevention.

PSN engaged community leaders in conversations, using the Collective Impact Model that led to actionable outcomes around data collection and to discussions with Caltrain, the regional commuter rail, about ways to restrict access. Thanks to the city of Palo Alto, track guards now physically monitor the five track intersections 24/7. The city and Caltrain also provided significant funding for effective fencing and vegetation removal (where an individual could hide before stepping to his or her death) and electronic trip wires and an intruder detection system to alert train conductors.

● **Prevention.** Because suicide is such a complex problem, we launched system-wide preventive actions.

Physicians at the Stanford Center for Sleep Sciences and Medicine were especially helpful, as were pediatricians from the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, and others from the Health Care Alliance for Response to Adolescent Depression, who made compelling public cases

about the need for our high school kids to get more sleep.

Leaders of the school board and district addressed student sleep deprivation and stress. While Gunn High School officially started at 8:25 A.M., at the time of the cluster, more than 300 students were enrolled in “zero period”—an optional early-morning opportunity for students to take additional classes or ensure a break later in their seven-period day. Despite objections from students and some parents, we eliminated zero period beginning the following year.

We took decisive action to better communicate homework guidelines and passed policy language to cap it at 15 hours per week. The school developed a time management form that parents and students had to sign acknowledging that taking three or more AP classes could be a significant health hazard and committing to ensuring students got the necessary sleep or dropped an AP class.

Arguably, the boldest prevention initiative was the move from a traditional seven-period day to a block schedule. In February, we tasked school leadership to design and institute a block schedule within three months for implementation

## Confronting Student Suicide

the following year. This arduous task was made possible by Principal Denise Herrmann; Ken Yale, a skilled facilitator; and a dedicated committee of students, parents, faculty, and staff who sacrificed countless hours.

Now, one year later, it has proven an extraordinary success. Longer class periods give teachers more time for meaningful interaction with students and longer classes enable students to have extended breaks during the day to catch up with friends and get work done. Having fewer classes means less homework each night; longer passing periods give students more time to engage with teachers and to transition between classes; and adding a tutorial period assures more help for students in need. Students report they have less stress and less homework, and get more sleep.

### Our Successes

We were able to make a positive difference in our schools and beyond.

- **We took quick, decisive action.** Convening the crisis team over the weekend with daily follow-ups, arranging for additional counseling and coverage, and being up front with parents and students were essential.

The school system's leaders displayed fortitude despite their deep pain. The support of our partners, especially local pediatricians and mental health clinicians, mattered a great deal. Their expertise and physical presence at meetings and on campus conveyed the urgency for action.

- **We adjusted policies.** The board's quick move on policy, while controversial, demonstrated tangible commitment to the students. Clearly communicating the homework policy and recommending the homework cap, removing the zero period, mandating a new schedule, and requiring time management forms from parents and students when scheduling classes were not always well-received, but they had a positive impact.

Students and staff followed suit with Changing the Narrative, mental health awareness and stigma-reduction clubs, and extended vigilance. Parents convened PTA parent education sessions, connected with the city and Caltrain on monitoring and restricting access to the railroad tracks, and cultivated supports for parents.

- **We destigmatized counseling.** Along with Project Safety Net, students and parents took the lead in making it acceptable

for students and families to seek counseling support.

- **We spotlighted the “hot spot.”** A parent and organizational researcher conducted an extensive study on the effectiveness of restricting accessible means of suicide. She developed a compelling presentation for Caltrain, which with our messaging and unwavering support of city leadership, made the case for reducing accessibility to the train tracks a priority.

### **Remaining Improvements**

We continue to learn from the tragedies as well as our own missteps, and openly identify those areas where we can and must do better.

- **Supporting faculty.** What I most regret is not recognizing the immediate need to support faculty members, counselors, and administrators who were grieving so deeply.

It had not occurred to me to acknowledge or address their pain and to be more attentive to their needs. The faculty carried on heroically, but many were reeling, and we should have given their mental wellness our fullest attention.

- **Supporting families.** Our administrators and teachers were not prepared or trained to handle the raw emotions. When

a hysterical parent breaks into a meeting screaming that school should be canceled, when a child breaks down in our office, when a parent blames herself, or a teacher feels intense guilt, we do not have the capacity as school leaders to provide immediate support.

Understanding the turmoil that churned within some individuals was so far beyond my experience that I could only listen and offer a few comforting words. In the future, we must incorporate professional training to build our skills to support others.

- **Managing the national media.** While we expected and received an onslaught of coverage, we underestimated the global focus on Palo Alto. In retrospect, we should have been more vocal and direct in not affording them unfettered access. While we worked hard to communicate the positive steps we had taken for both prevention and intervention, the national media largely focused on the tragedy, which in turn depressed morale for both school-based and broader communities.

### **Hope for the Future**

Our district’s goals around differentiated instruction, consistency in grading and home-

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work, and innovative academic program development were relegated to the back burner as mental health and wellness and social-emotional learning assumed paramount importance. Today, our district goals reflect a more intentional balance: high-quality teaching and learning, equity and access, and student wellness.

The problem of suicide thus far has proven too complex to be solved. The many changes we've implemented have made a positive difference, but no way exists to measure the return on the substantial investment by the district, city, and community.

Is it a good sign that more families are seeking counseling? Does more students seeking counseling signal even more stress on their lives or is it a positive outcome of destigmatizing counseling and funding more mental health clinicians?

Which is the more positive metric: increased or decreased numbers of hospitalized students? Are fewer kids hospitalized because they are seeking and finding effective supports sooner or have they found better ways to mask their symptoms?

Does preventing students from taking too many AP courses reduce academic pressure

or deprive them of classes they want to take because they like the academic challenge?

The metric that matters most is that we don't lose another young person to suicide. It is public enemy No. 1 in Palo Alto, and it eludes capture. However, we hope by continuing to work together, truly together, to recognize and combat mental illness, to curb impulsive responses to suicidal ideation, to restrict the access to means and to instill hope, belonging, purpose, joy, and meaningful connections with a caring adult in every school, we can keep this menace at bay. ■



"Mom, small bandwidth is like you trying to squeeze into a dress that fit you 10 years ago."

# A Day in Court

## How Mock Trials Bring Learning to Life

**BY DAVID SHERRIN**

*From American Educator*

We are at a courthouse in Brooklyn for a mock Rwandan genocide trial of Athanase Seromba, a Catholic priest who allegedly participated in Hutu massacres of the Tutsi. A student playing a defense attorney strides to the podium to question the witness for the prosecution. They are both confident and prepared.

“Isn’t it true,” she begins, “that you said you never saw Seromba at his house while the meeting was taking place?” The witness pauses. “Incorrect, he was there.” She shuffles through

papers, looking for the evidence. “That’s not what you said in your affidavit,” she retorts. The silence of the crowd transforms into oohs and claps, as if it were a sporting event. “You never saw Seromba with a gun, right?” she continues. “You never saw Seromba killing anyone?” The witness has no place to go. “No, I did not,” he replies. “No further questions,” the lawyer finishes, as she turns away.

Experiences like this one in the courtroom are some of the moments that I most look forward to during the school year, and these are the times I know I’ve truly witnessed my students’ learning. Role-plays

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*David Sherrin teaches social studies and English at Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City. He is also the author of The Classes They Remember: Using Role-Plays to Bring Social Studies and English to Life and Judging for Themselves: Using Mock Trials to Bring Social Studies and English to Life (© 2016 Routledge), from which this article is excerpted. Condensed, with permission, from the Fall 2016 issue of American Educator, the quarterly journal of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.*

## A Day in Court

infuse much of my teaching and are at the heart of what I value and do in the classroom.

My passion for mock trials runs deep. In my book *Judging for Themselves: Using Mock Trials to Bring Social Studies and English to Life*, from which this article is drawn, I discuss their effectiveness as tools for learning and assessments. As a mock trial day approaches, I teach in top gear, filled with adrenaline and excitement. The reasons are multiple: Students are performing and their knowledge is public; the outcome depends entirely on their work but is based on my effective preparation and scaffolding; students are taking on roles of historical or literary characters; outside partners, friends, and family are involved; and students are engaging in some of the most challenging and multifaceted intellectual work that we can provide.

I first began using mock trials a decade ago as a first-year teacher, when I created an early ancestor of my current Galileo and Martin Luther trials. After looking at primary sources together, I divided students into roles of historical figures ranging from Pope Urban to Copernicus and watched gleefully as prosecuting lawyers pinned

down witnesses under withering cross-examination.

Over the years, my mock trial repertoire and strategies developed far beyond that first attempt. I began emphasizing historical authenticity and the use of actual trial testimonies in my genocide tribunal trials for the Holocaust and Rwanda. As my teaching started to include a humanities and English component, I created a mock trial for the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and also for imaginary literary trials, such as one based on the actions of characters in *The Pearl*. My mock trials have always been criminal trials, though colleagues have shown me the value of civil ones as well.

### Why Do Mock Trials?

Here is why I do mock trials: They are challenging, authentic projects in which students create and then do something “real.” They serve as both learning and assessment tools since students learn from doing the work and teachers have a tangible product for evaluating understanding and growth. Mock trials are engaging for students—the role-playing gets them out of their chairs, collaborating, and entering into the mindsets and perspectives of their characters. ►

Equally important, preparation for the trials becomes what a colleague called “one of the most rigorous projects I have ever seen students do.” Why? First, the type of work is hard enough that law students take at least three years to master the art of legal questioning. More specifically, mock trials require students to read texts even more closely than normal

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in order to break them down, manipulate them, look for what is and isn't there, and then try to understand and use them to serve the goals of a particular character.

A mock trial is not just about getting students to answer questions. It is about having them figure out the answers to questions that you haven't asked and then getting them to write the questions for someone else to give those answers. It is about seeing evidence that is there but

also about widening tiny gaps of what isn't there that, perhaps, make a case burst open.

Mock trials are like role-plays with documents. Students recognize the challenging nature of the work. They need to see a text through the lens of their claims and perspectives. Bias and credibility are crucial concepts not only in the historian's work but perhaps even more for a lawyer. In short, mock trials incorporate all of what great social studies teachers look for—claim, counterclaim, selection of evidence, use of evidence, perspective, and sourcing/bias—and put it into a tantalizing package.

A strong mock trial cultivates engagement that leads to high-quality work. One of my quietest students wrote: “The mock trial was like an experience of it actually happening. I think going into a courtroom and role-playing is really fun because we don't just read and write—we act. My favorite part out of the whole class was the courtroom. It helps us learn in a living experience way.”

Before the day in court, mock trials are about intellectual preparation. Students engage in the heavy-duty work of lawyers—reading carefully, crafting questions, thinking about holes

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in arguments, experimenting, and piecing together a case. When trial day comes, they need to put it in practice, in public, for all to see. It is a performance of their learning in the truest sense.

The rigorous nature of this strategy does not mean it is only for the elite. I have incorporated mock trials with diverse students. I began them at the Facing History School, a public high school in New York City that serves high-needs students. I taught mainly 9th grade and developed mock trials to support students who were behind grade level.

My current school, Harvest Collegiate High School, serves a wider spectrum of the New York City population, and the inherent differentiation within mock trial roles allows me to challenge the highest performers and to meet struggling students at their level.

### **Creating a Mock Trial**

The term “mock trial” can take on various meanings. Most often, in schools, we use it to refer to a mock trial club in which students learn the intricacies of legal proceedings, including the introduction of evidence and objections, in order to take on a fictitious criminal or civil case and

compete against other schools.

My strategy, which is meant to be used in the classroom, attempts to use the core of the legal format (witnesses, evidence, opening and closing statements, and direct and cross-examination questions) to build a realistic experience for students that develops important academic skills. For the most part, I am not concerned with the minutiae of trial rules unless they contribute to a key skill and comprehension of content and themes in social studies and English.

Preparing a successful mock trial can be daunting, so I’ve broken down the necessary steps below.

● **Choosing and teaching a story**—Each of the two to three trials I hold during the school year reflects a central moment in a much larger chapter in human history, whether it’s the Protestant Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, or the Holocaust. It makes most sense if the project fits into the larger content goals of your course. For example, only do a trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg if you’re spending time looking at American reactions to the Cold War.

For the trial to have meaning, it needs to come after learning

about the larger event and the larger context of history. Before our Nuremberg trial, students spend weeks learning about the causes of the Holocaust, Nazi policies, and the concentration camps. We study Martin Luther and Galileo before our cases on them, not only because it provides meaning for students, but also because they cannot try these cases in “court” without that base comprehension. Since we are using primary sources set in those times and places, there is too much complex vocabulary—e.g., “indulgences” or the “Copernican system”—that can trip students up unless they already understand it.

One common question is whether to do an actual or imaginary trial. I fall firmly in the former camp, although it is a bit more from a gut reaction than anything else. My sense is that since there is so much “history” out there for students to learn that did happen, it doesn’t make much sense to spend time and effort engaging with something that didn’t. By focusing on a trial that did happen, we can then also have discussions about its real implications and consequences, and the perceptions around it. My goal is to make role-play as authentic as possible, and that can happen

only through using actual witnesses and sources.

● **Selecting a defendant**—To avoid having a trial end up too one-sided, I make sure to have a defendant who brings out moral complexities, who could be reasonably found either guilty or not guilty, and whose case matter is accessible to students. For instance, I considered a few possibilities in planning a Nuremberg trial. First, I looked for a doctor we could put on trial, perhaps one who had done experiments on Jews and abused his authority as a physician, but I could not locate enough primary source material to put together a great trial with authentic evidence. And I knew, of course, that if I put someone like Adolf Eichmann, Rudolf Hoess, or Hermann Goering on the stand, the defense would have a nearly impossible task.

So I began to consider three different witnesses who were defendants in the principal Nuremberg trial: Walter Funk, Albert Speer, and Julius Streicher. Funk and Speer were industrialists and economists, which raised an interesting moral dilemma about responsibility. Were those who financed the war, the army, and the camps responsible for the genocide? Streicher, meanwhile, was a propagandist who

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used his newspaper, *Der Stürmer*, as a launching pad to incite hatred of Jews.

To choose between these defendants, I dove into the testimony of their cases to get a sense of what type of evidence would be available. Using Yale University's Avalon Project website ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/imt.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/imt.asp)), which has translations of the original court transcripts, I pored over the transcripts of the trials to begin to separate out the statements of possible witnesses. I gathered evidence for about 15 witnesses for the Streicher case and about 13 possible witnesses for the Funk case. When I began to look deeper into Speer's case, I realized that the economic nature of his work was just not as comprehensible. I couldn't seem to glue together coherent statements that would make sense to my students. So, I threw him out of the running.

At that point, I realized that I had a similar issue with Funk's testimony. There was enough of it, but the content was so highly economic and technical that my students would have an extra layer of difficulty to wade through.

In the case of Streicher, evidence was available and the

theme, propaganda, was both accessible and highly interesting to my students. The testimonies were at a reachable level, and his case raised thought-provoking issues about culpability. By the time the concentration camps were underway, the Nazi Party had mostly exiled Streicher and he was living on a farm. He took part in no major decisions involving the

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**My strategy is to use the core of the legal format to build a realistic experience for students that develops important academic skills.**

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Holocaust, except possibly on Kristallnacht, and he was not involved in the organization or running of the camps. For him, then, the main question is whether the words and images that appeared in *Der Stürmer* served as a direct cause of the genocide. What is the power of our words? He became the right defendant.

● **Choosing the witnesses—** Choosing the witnesses can make or break the success of a

case. My first rule of “witness selection” is to attempt to be as authentic as possible. Who was actually involved in the trial? When I first began my trials of Galileo and Luther, I stretched too wide and far in selecting witnesses. I chose people like Johannes Kepler and Erasmus who were involved in the wider discussions about Galileo and Luther but who played no role in their actual trials.

In leaning toward greater authenticity over the years, I initially would whittle the witnesses down to people who were directly involved in those cases, like the pope or Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, although they were not actual witnesses at the trials. More recently, however, I realized that even this narrow scope was not restricted enough. These were not American trials with outside witnesses; they were inquisition cases with only one witness: the defendant. The attempt to hold an inquisition trial using the American criminal justice format was hindering student understanding of the event and the idea of justice. I realized that the only witnesses to use were the only two actual witnesses: the defendants, Luther and Galileo. Everything needed to be about how they saw and responded to

their own key statements and writings and those of authorities of the Church.

A literature trial like the one in *To Kill a Mockingbird* does the work for us. The obvious witnesses to use are the ones that the author created for the trial—Tom Robinson, Mayella Ewell, Bob Ewell (Mayella’s father), and Sheriff Heck Tate.

A greater challenge is in putting together a full trial in the format of the American criminal justice system or an international genocide tribunal, whether we are talking about the trials of the killers of Emmett Till, the Rosenbergs, or Julius Streicher. The first step is to understand who the witnesses actually were in the cases. In the Streicher case, that meant first reading through court records and testimonies on the Avalon website. Some options were obvious: the people who were actually called to the stand, like Streicher himself; his wife, Adele Streicher; Friedrich Strobel, a government official; and Fritz Herrwerth, his driver.

Needing more prosecution witnesses, I began to include people who spoke of Streicher in other texts, such as Viktor Lutze, chief of the Nazi Sturmabteilung. I made one of Streicher’s illustrators into another

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witness. Each was there to comment on articles and drawings in *Der Stürmer*. Students had to try to understand the sources from these characters' perspectives and what they said about Streicher.

Now, however, I stick even closer to the actual process. At Nuremberg, the prosecution made its case not by calling its own witnesses but by submitting the astounding number of self-incriminating documents that the Nazis had created. In this project, the only witnesses are the actual witnesses who were called to the witness stand, and the prosecution must make its case through cross-examination and use of exhibits.

● **Creating the affidavits and exhibits**—One reason I love these trials is that students spend so much time dissecting one or two sources. Normally, we read something and move on. With trials, the evidence sheets that I create for students, which include affidavits and exhibits, may appear too hard at first glance. Students often don't understand their evidence sheets right away. This is the beauty of spending four days prepping for the trial, during which each student focuses on the same one to three pages of text. First, they struggle to

understand it. Then, they strive to pull out ideas and evidence. Finally, they connect the dots, piece together a case, and write questions that support their positions.

My main rule for evidence sheets is to be authentic. If there is testimony from the trial, teachers can adapt it into an affidavit. If the trial refers to the defendant's writings or other texts, teachers can use them as exhibits. You may create general exhibits that all lawyers and witnesses have access to or ones that are specific to certain witnesses and included alongside their affidavits.

To clarify, affidavits refer to sworn testimony taken before a trial. In my mock trials, I use "affidavit" to refer to an evidence sheet that includes the actual words of a particular witness, which I normally excerpt and adapt from real court testimony. Exhibits refer to additional documents or primary sources directly related to the case. For example, my evidence sheets for Adele Streicher include her adapted testimony as an affidavit and one of her husband's articles as an exhibit. The students playing the lawyers (whether prosecution or defense) questioning Adele may use any of these documents to

compose their questions. The student playing her as a witness also uses them to prepare.

I always “shop” first in the court record, whether I’m looking for the transcripts or a final judgment. In the Nuremberg case of Julius Streicher, I used the Avalon website, which provides the trial transcript. With it, I composed affidavits for all of the defense witnesses.

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**One compelling aspect of mock trials is that they differentiate for widely diverse skill levels.**

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There were a few difficulties with Adele’s testimony.

First, the text included the questions of the lawyer, Dr. Marx. I want students creating the questions, so I needed to get rid of them in the adapted version. When I did so, however, the text no longer made perfect sense because Adele’s statements were in the form of answers to questions that were no longer there. As a fix, I made minimal adaptations to maintain the integrity of the original.

I also need to take into ac-

count that lawyers enter exhibits into evidence, which doesn’t always come out in the transcript. At Nuremberg, the prosecution made its case against Streicher with copious examples of his speeches and articles from *Der Stürmer*. The students can’t grasp the case or make cogent arguments without access to excerpts from the newspaper or speeches. To provide them access, I used professor Randall Bytwerk’s website of Nazi propaganda (<http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ww2era.htm>). I excerpted the texts for length and matched up each one with an affidavit on a related topic. For example, one defense witness in his affidavit argues that Streicher never advocated violence against Jews. Hence, that witness’s evidence sheet includes that statement, plus an exhibit with one of Streicher’s speeches in which he proposes extermination. This allows the prosecuting lawyer, doing cross-examination, to attack the claim from the affidavit by comparing it with the exhibit. My key move is to identify a main topic or theme for each witness and then ensure that the witness’s evidence sheet includes two texts: one that (mostly) supports the defense and one that

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(mostly) supports the prosecution. Having contradictory texts side by side opens up a wealth of options for the lawyers on both sides to dig deeply in their questioning.

Every trial requires similar adaptations to provide what students need in a manageable space.

### • Assigning the students—

One compelling aspect of mock trials is that they differentiate for a class of students' widely diverse skill levels. We can assign roles and texts to challenge each student at just the right level. I tend to have different lawyers for each witness, and I assign them based on the difficulty of each task or role. The hardest job, which I give my strongest students, is cross-examination, because they are not necessarily writing questions based on the evidence sheets. Instead, they must find holes, problems, biases, and contradictions.

The witnesses and the lawyers doing direct examination can work together on the questions. My "middle" learners become witnesses, and they can help create questions that they will answer on the stand. Being a witness requires the ability to think on one's feet and process information quickly. My struggling students take on

the role of lawyers doing direct examination, whether for the defense or the prosecution. Direct examination is easier, and they have the support of the witnesses.

This system for mock trials has increased collaboration, provided opportunities for all, and targeted the needs of each student. It is authentic differentiation.

### Final Thoughts

Mock trials can help students develop critical-thinking and communication skills and learn about events that help define our sense of justice. Why not immerse our students in a learning activity that brings up wellsprings of emotion and excitement?

And when we begin to delve into not only the intricacies of a particular case but also its implications for the concept of "justice," we are engaging in a deep philosophical and ethical conversation that has its roots in Hammurabi, Deuteronomy, Confucius, and Aristotle. As a result, our students become part of that chain of thinkers who question what is right, what is just, and how we order a society in which we have some hope of achieving those lofty goals. ■

# Great Teachers Are Experts at Difficult Conversations

Here's their advice on talking about race.

**BY CHALKBEAT STAFF**

From *Chalkbeat*

Every day, teachers lead conversations that most of us are too afraid to have. Whether the topic is race, police violence, or guns, the best teachers are skilled at helping mere humans—young humans—have difficult conversations with openness, honesty, and respect.

So as Americans struggle to talk about racism, who better to ask for advice than teachers? We spoke with seven educators across the country and compiled their suggestions.

**Start by understanding yourself.**

*Jaishri Shankar, teacher in Kingstree, SC, for three years:*

These conversations have to be founded in your relationships with students. It's uncomfortable—and it's tougher if you're coming from a distant place and you don't already have a good relationship with your kids.

Another piece is understanding yourself and your identity. I am an Indian-American woman and the identities of most of my students have been African-American. Many share an identity with victims of police

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*Condensed, with permission, from a July 8, 2016, post on Chalkbeat, a nonprofit news organization committed to covering efforts to improve schools for all children. To read the article in its entirety, visit <http://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2016/07/08/great-teachers-are-experts-at-difficult-conversations-heres-their-advice-to-america-on-talking-about-race/#.V6Drga7C0ik>.*

## Great Teachers Are Experts at Difficult Conversations

brutality. I've learned my role is to listen and learn.

The instant that stands out the most was the killing of Eric Garner. One of my students lived around the corner from me and she'd frequently come over. We had been talking about police brutality right before he was killed.

A couple of days [later] the audio was released—where he's saying, 'I cannot breathe.' I realized my students could not care less about the layers of the Earth that day. What was more important was turning the classroom into what my kids needed. That day they needed the space and time to process what was happening and what it means to them as students of color.

### **Defy your fear.**

*Jade Anderson, 1st-grade teacher at Memphis Business Academy:*

Don't be afraid. Your students want to hear what people are saying. They look up to you, they admire you.

I think we are afraid to talk about social issues, but the kids do understand. Be bold and honest.

### **Acknowledge what's going on.**

*Tyrone C. Howard, associate*

*dean of equity, diversity, and inclusion and director, UCLA Black Male Institute:*

I'm often surprised when things occur and teachers don't say a word. They say, I teach chemistry, or what does this have to do with algebra. What exemplary teachers do is acknowledge it. Kids see these things on social media and on the news media. And so the teachers create a space. They help them separate fact from fiction.

Teachers can provide a real sense of calming and real space for students to share what they're feeling and thinking. When students are feeling scared for their own safety, they can provide that space.

And teachers have to inform themselves. They [have to] know what's happening, so they can have a conversation. Not that they need to take sides, but so that they can help students make meaning.

How we get more teachers to do that is the million dollar question. We all just need a lot of understanding. This is a time for healing and empathy and love. And it sounds cliché, but we're in a precarious time, and students need us more than they've needed us in a long time.

**Move from sorrow  
to action.**

*Faith Benson, teacher at Wright Middle School in Nashville, TN:*

The first priority as a teacher is to talk about it.

When I go into the classroom after things happen, my first priority is to make sure I am not re-traumatizing my students. [This week] teachers acknowledged what happened but they did so in a way that really avoided the harsh details.

The ones who already knew about it, had been talking to their families about it—it was a gentle reminder that this is still important. Even though we're in school, if you want to talk about it, you can. If you're ready to talk about it in the academic way, I think it's important to carry it through academics.

During my first year of teaching, I saw the value of bringing things into the classroom. That year it was the death of Michael Brown. But the mistake I made, I kind of left my students ... just thinking, 'Wow. Things are really bad.' And the important next step is yeah, it's really bad. But here's how you can become an advocate.

It's kind of a tough place to be in, where you so deeply

care about what happens in the world, but the world is telling you you're too young to make a difference.

**Remember: Everyone  
lives in a context.**

*Rico Munn, superintendent of Aurora Public Schools in CO:*

I'm a black man in America. That has some context in these stories. I'm the father of a young boy. That has its own context. And then I think about it as an American and how it affects the children in my community.

The schools are part of the community. These aren't school issues. These are larger societal issues. And schools tend to be a reflection of our society.

I think in any classroom setting, teachers need to be aware of the experiences of their students—both individually and collectively. Good teaching takes those experiences and helps put them into context. Good teaching helps students understand the world around them, and how they can effect change.

**Push for evidence.**

*Rich Milner, Helen Faison Professor of Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh:*

Students tend to adopt what-

## Great Teachers Are Experts at Difficult Conversations

ever their parents do on particular issues. What the educational system can do is really provide a space for students to think about and question their views on particular issues.

Play devil's advocate, so there's not just one narrative that is provided in the classroom. And really push students for evidence. Really early in their development, teachers should encourage students to substantiate their views.

The best teachers don't always have the conversations only when there's a catastrophe. They create the kind of classroom from the very beginning that is open to discourse and conversation. They position themselves as learners, not coming in as the arbiters of all knowledge. They express views, ask questions, situate their desks and chairs in ways that allow for a more communal conversation. Teachers also empower and equip students to lead the conversations on their own.

The thing is about deep self-reflection. Not just thinking about others, but starting with the self.

### **Resist the temptation to shut down.**

*Noelle Ford, high school Spanish teacher in the Baltimore area:*

Trayvon Martin happened when I was teaching, and what we did in my class, we read current event articles from five different media sources and we talked about bias, and they had to go through what is a fact, what happened.

I think it's extremely important to have conversations. But it's stronger when the students have those conversations between themselves, rather than me telling them what to think.

I taught for three years in South Carolina ... It was a pretty diverse school. So things can get tense. We had the Emmanuel shootings [in Charleston, SC] happen when I was teaching. We had a lot of racial tension.

The first year I struggled to allow my students have honest conversations without it being guided by prejudice. But we strived as a team and a community to constantly have those conversations about tension. It's better to bring it to light versus shutting it down. ■

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# Aha Moments on the Road to Better Teaching

BY MYRON DUECK  
From *MiddleWeb*

Change can be difficult. We find ourselves entrenched in old habits, and, therefore, much of what we do is what we have always done. However, there is often an even bigger hurdle to leap when it comes to change—we don't see the need for it.

A home-improvement friend suggested that I get someone unfamiliar with my home to point out things that could use a little TLC. This friend told me, "Myron, you don't notice things that jump out at me immediately—you are oblivious to the familiar."

He suggested two changes for

my home and, after I recovered from the subtle sting of criticism, I appreciated the analysis. It wasn't that I was unwilling to fix my dog-chewed door frame, but, ironically, I saw it so often that I did not actually *see* the problem. I think the same issue exists in schools.

## **Grading Smarter Starts with Awareness**

For many teachers, what stands in the way of change is not a lack of willingness but a lack of awareness. My experience in this area served as the impetus for writing *Grading Smarter, Not Harder: Assessment Strategies that Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn*. In some

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*Myron Dueck is a vice-principal, teacher and author from SD 67 in British Columbia, Canada. His book, Grading Smarter, Not Harder—Assessment Strategies that Motivate Kids and Help Them Learn was released by ASCD in July 2014. Condensed, with permission, from a blog post on MiddleWeb, October 12, 2014. Read the entire post at middleweb.com, a site dedicated to sharing teaching and learning resources for teachers, school leaders and parents.*

## Aha Moments on the Road to Better Teaching

respects, I could have titled the book *Things I Never Noticed Before*.

With that in mind, here are a few epiphanies I've had along the road to better teaching. Each has helped me to see the need for change and enact it effectively.

### Improving Unit Plans

I never noticed that my learning targets were hidden from sight and actually quite nebulous should anyone succeed in uncovering them. To fix this, I started with one single Assessment for Learning element and established clear learning intentions for it.

Based on Rick Stiggins's work, I highlighted what students needed to know, reason, demonstrate and produce. Students facing heavy course loads appreciated the efficient study guide. Struggling learners found that the clear targets provided greater focus and accessibility.

### Improving Unit Tests and Retests

I also never noticed that my unit tests failed to give useful, specific feedback.

Historically, I provided students with a single score, on a 100-point scale, that supposedly

reflected mastery of an array of learning targets. Telling a student that she had scored 72% on a WWII test containing a dozen targets was tantamount to my doctor informing me that I was 72% healthy following my physical. What good is that information? My students needed to know how they were performing on each individual target and I needed to know how effectively I was teaching each target.

I decided to dismantle and rebuild my unit tests, dividing them into sections based on individual learning targets. My last step was to design a "sister test" that mirrored the first one in every way, except with different questions, to serve as a retest for students who wanted to retake one or more sections.

This new unit test/retest strategy provided me with tangible data corresponding to individual learning targets and was a game changer in my classroom. The benefits:

- Students could adapt review strategies to specific feedback.
- I could identify teaching areas that needed improvement.
- Parent-teacher interviews were based on real data.
- Previous quiz scores were rendered obsolete based on the

new corresponding test section score.

- At-risk learners readily approached retests because they were less daunting.
- Exceptional learners clawing for every extra point chose retesting over lobbying.

### **Improving Multiple-Choice Questions**

A few colleagues and I noticed that multiple-choice questions on tests were horribly flawed as a tool to measure understanding. We therefore coined a process called “I know I Am Close’ Multiple Choice,” by which students who had narrowed their response down to two options had the opportunity to explain why they were considering both answers.

This simple process had profound results:

- It reduced stress levels for all students.
- Students were able to show a broader level of understanding.
- Students were able to identify flawed questions.
- ESL students could attempt questions and identify the terms that were unclear.

### **Improving Major Project Planning Sheets**

A few colleagues and I wanted to further embrace project-

based learning, but we soon recognized that many students were not fully grasping the learning targets. Students got so excited about the method that they often failed to learn and understand the content.

To resolve this, we asked students to indicate the learning targets they intended to cover *before* starting a project. In addition, students were asked to provide details on the methods and approaches they were going to employ to demonstrate understanding. Clear learning targets blended with increased opportunities for creative elements resulted in astounding projects.

### **Improving Grading**

With all of these changes, it soon became obvious that I was approaching a dusty showdown with my grading scheme. After exerting all of this effort to improve my unit plans, testing systems and formats, and project planning, my traditional grading scheme seemed to sabotage the valuable data I was after. I couldn’t explain why I was applying penalties that:

- Had nothing to do with learning.
- Misrepresented the data intended to reflect student understanding. ▶

## Aha Moments on the Road to Better Teaching

- Unjustly penalized struggling and impoverished learners. My penalty paradigm was antiquated and ineffective. My rules reflected what had been done to me rather than a set of guidelines intended to aid my students' learning.

By critically analyzing my own grading rituals, I came to the conclusion that any penalty I assigned must pass four CARE conditions:

- **Care**—The penalty must evoke concern and action on the part of the learner. *Many students showed little or no concern over the threat of a 10% late penalty.*

- **Ambition**—The enacting of the penalty must align with the ultimate objectives of the teacher. *My aim was to grade a student's level of understanding, not his behaviors.*

- **Reduction**—The number of times the penalty is enacted must decrease over time for a specific learner. *I seemed to be giving out zeros and late deductions like they were candy!*

- **Empowerment**—The penal-

ized person must have control over the causal factors that lead to the infraction. *Students living with poverty, violence and a host of other issues may not be solely to blame for missing homework deadlines.*

Based on these four conditions, and with suggestions from Ken O'Connor's *15 Fixes for Broken Grades*, I eliminated the use of zeros for missing work, axed late penalties and stopped wasting my time grading uniform homework. For each of these changes, I selected replacement routines that fit the four CARE conditions.

### See-It-Yourself Improvement

In the end, I realized that I was comfortable with change, so long as I recognized the need for it. I came to understand that *if* something was learned was more important than *when* it was learned.

Most of all, I was surprised at how much the relationships in my class improved by altering my assessment, project and grading methods. ■

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# *What Research Tells Us About . . .*

# Using Technology to Support Underserved Students

**BY MOLLY B. ZIELEZINSKI**  
From *EdSurge*

Despite all the celebratory rhetoric around our nation's declining dropout rates, during a given year, nearly 20% of students expected to graduate do not. Furthermore, according to John Hopkins and Civic Enterprises, "unacceptably low levels of minority, low-income, English Language Learners, and special education students are graduating from high school." This is true for 29% of African-American students, 25% of Hispanic students, 39% of students who have limited English proficiency, and 27% of low

income students (as shown on Ed.gov).

Hardware can't fill this digital divide—especially when K-12 schools in low-income neighborhoods are only using it for remediation purposes. In the last three years, U.S. schools have begun seeing an unprecedented level of new hardware and software in their classrooms. But how can we use this massive influx of technology to support our nations' underserved students?

## **The (Alarming) Research on Edtech and Equity**

Recently, I had the opportunity to work with some edu-

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## Using Technology to Support Underserved Students

cational superheroes—Linda Darling-Hammond and Shelley Goldman—on a massive literature review and policy brief guided by the question above. During this project, I personally vetted almost 400 publications, landing on 52 that were relevant, rigorous, and grounded in actual research. Taken as a collection (outlined in a presentation on the Digital Learning Ecosystem at [www.slideshow.net/molly\\_bullock/digital-learning-ecosystem-multiple-learners](http://www.slideshow.net/molly_bullock/digital-learning-ecosystem-multiple-learners)), they revealed a holistic picture of the parts that must work together for edtech to be effective in the classroom.

You may be wondering, why isn't the massive influx of technology supporting those who need it the most? Research on edtech points to an explanation of why access is not enough. Specifically, Mark Warschauer found that "overall, students who are black, Hispanic, or low income are more likely to use computers for drill-and-practice, whereas students who are white or high income are more likely to use computers for simulations or authentic applications." This means that access alone isn't enough to raise the bar for underserved students.

When given access, digital

tools are being used for "remediation" in low-income environments, which isn't working. In fact, when we only use edtech for basic skills with underserved students—but use it in much more meaningful ways with more privileged students—we are driving the boundaries of the digital divide further apart, not closing it. Using digital tools solely for drill-and-practice activities and remediation can and often does negatively affect student achievement, not to mention engagement, motivation, and self-esteem.

If we can't use edtech for skills and drills, what can we use it for? Here are our suggestions, with five tips that provide a good starting point for anyone who wants to implement new digital tools or evaluate those tools already being used.

### **Actionable Tip #1: Stop using technology for remediation!**

Instead of using technology to drill kids on grade level standards, use it to help students engage in authentic tasks—those that are grounded in relevant ongoing work that has some purpose beyond the immediate completion of the activity.

This can play out a lot of different ways, but we bumped into

the same few promising practices in our lit review. Based on the research, we recommend digital tools that support problem solving, inferencing, analyzing and synthesizing information from multiple sources, as well as tools that develop 21st-century skills, including communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. These should be prioritized 100% of the time over activities involving basic skill tasks (memorizing facts, applying rules, etc.). Some great tools for this include:

- **The Visual Understanding Environment (VUE):** Powerful open-source software for concept mapping. VUE allows users to create complex visual representations of information from scratch.

- **Canva:** A content creation web app that allows users to design presentations, social media graphics, posters, book covers, business cards, and more. Canva allows beginners to engage in professional-looking information design without the huge learning curve that usually comes with this kind of work.

- **Declara:** A web-based application for teams and individuals that offers a unique blend of content consumption, content curation, and communication/sharing.

**Actionable Tip #2:  
Let students create  
original digital content.**

Give students opportunities to be content creators rather than content consumers. Content creation—when done well—allows students to communicate their own ideas creatively. Some examples include:

- Using technology to craft multimedia stories;
- Filming and producing documentaries or designing posters;
- Leveraging social media as a tool for teaching and learning;
- Publishing on wikis, blogs, and/or websites.

The idea is that you want students to engage deeply in ongoing projects within and across platforms. As an added benefit, students can begin to build lifelong-learning portfolios showcasing work that makes them proud. (Bonus points if it also happens to feature their content knowledge and technological literacy skills.)

**Actionable Tip #3:  
Pick digital tools  
that promote interactivity  
and discovery.**

Does the app or program allow students to construct their own understanding of com-

## Using Technology to Support Underserved Students

plex phenomenon? Does it encourage students to represent thinking in multiple forms (text, pictures, videos, digital interactions, or some combination)? Will students engage with data or true-to-life simulations? Will they use sensors to measure real-life phenomena?

These are some of the markers of digital tools that support learning through interactivity and discovery. To really find out about a tool's level of interactivity and discovery (whether you are a designer, educator, administrator, or policymaker), you need to engage with the digital tool—really get your hands dirty with the technology and use it the way students will. Test the digital tool, and use your activity and engagement as a lens to evaluate its capacity to support meaning-making and active reflection, related to desired learning outcomes.

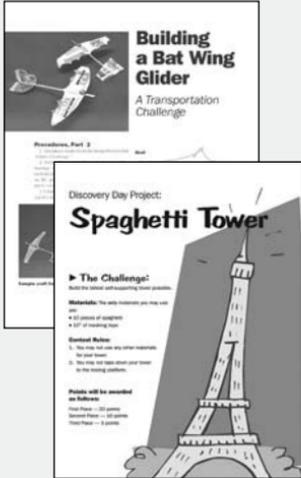
**Actionable Tip #4:**  
**Honor students as experts,  
and let them share  
their expertise with  
an authentic audience.**

With the internet at our fingertips, we have access to all kinds of potential audiences—known and unknown, local and global, those with shared interests, shared questions,

shared goals. Giving students an authentic audience to share their work improves the quality of their work. Instead of writing about “how to make a ham sandwich” for the teacher, students could be writing or producing a video about “how to create a working calculator in Minecraft” for the robust Minecraft digital community. In the latter example, the readers are interested, their feedback is targeted and contextualized, and there are higher risks and rewards in terms of building confidence, content knowledge, and identity formation.

**Actionable Tip #5:**  
**Find the right blend  
of teacher and technology.**

I can say without hesitation that the world needs a lot more research on blended learning in K-12, but from what we've got, we believe that the teacher must play a crucial role in supporting the content students encounter through digital learning. The only substantial study published on this prior to 2013 found significantly greater student satisfaction in environments with (1) high levels of teacher support for the digital material and (2) opportunities for peer interaction. The authors of this report also



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recommended the use of real-time digital feedback in digital learning environments.

As a final note: Where I live in Silicon Valley, it is not uncommon for middle and high school students to write code, participate in blended lessons, or explore a fabrication lab. But other students—the same age but living across the highway in a lower-income area—are much more hard-pressed to find opportunities like this within their schools and communities. In a recent panel on Education and Inequity, Darling-Hammond calls attention to the fact that usage of East Palo Alto library computers is limited to 15 minutes, and the lines to use them are often long. If you are a student without access to a computer at home and limited access to technology within your community, you simply cannot engage deeply in the kind of tasks the literature recommends.

To help our underserved students learn, we must eradicate all traces of the argument that access to digital tools is key to minimizing the digital divide, and instead advocate for changes in the use of these tools to better engage our underserved students in authentic tasks that support the development of higher-order thinking skills. ■

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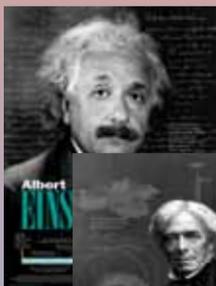
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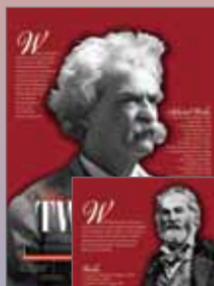
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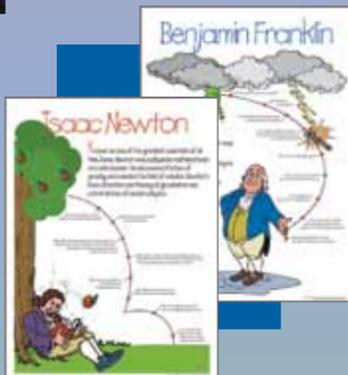
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