

NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



School Culture

Partnerships

Creating a Peaceful School

Implementation Description

The educational program at The Exploris School is built around four core pillars: Global education, Project Based Learning, Co-Teaching and the Responsive Classroom. Exploris has an intentional focus on substantially increasing the percent of educationally disadvantaged (ED) students served at the school. While all four of the core pillars are critical to student success, as the percent of ED students increases it becomes even more important to ensure consistent implementation of responsive classroom practices throughout the entire school. Research notes that children who are educationally disadvantaged often lack social capital.¹ In an effort to develop students' sense of well-being and belonging at school, Exploris' emphasis on relationships is at the core of everything they do. As noted in Ruby Payne's *Nine Powerful Practices*, building respectful relationships with students, especially those living in poverty, is fundamental to the learning process.² The school already has a focus on best practices in behavior management for children living in poverty, but recognized a need to expand their understanding especially as it related to social-emotional learning. Utilizing NC ACCESS grant funding, Exploris initiated a collaborative partnership with Peaceful Schools NC. Peaceful Schools NC offers resources to *"help schools actively create and sustain positive school climate"*³ through organizing activities and opportunities for charter schools to connect, communicate, and collaborate. These opportunities have proven to be very valuable to The Exploris School leadership team. The opportunity to network with other independent charter schools is one small way Exploris is growing from the partnership with Peaceful Schools NC. A more significant collaborative effort involves the design and delivery of professional development to the school staff and development of a student mentoring program piloted during the first year of this project. The collaborative partnership yielded an eleven-hour professional

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About This School

The Exploris School

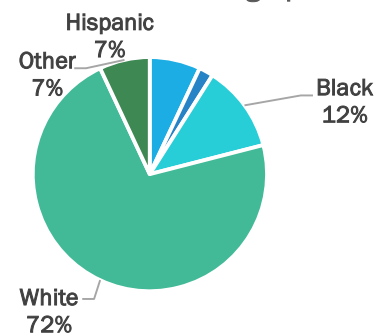
Exploris strives to create independent learners, creative and critical thinkers, and active and responsible participants in a global society. Interdisciplinary inquiry-based theme projects that focus on compelling and current issues like sustainable living, peace and conflict, world health, and human rights bring authenticity to the students' work. Authentic material and human resources replace textbooks as the primary learning tools allowing learning to be active and student-centered. Community partnerships and culminating theme projects are central to Exploris' adolescent-centered, globally-focused curriculum.

Year School Opened: 1997-98

Grant Awarded: 2019-20

Initial Grade Levels Served: K-8

2019-20 Student Demographics



% ED Student Population: 25%

Urbanicity: Urban / Raleigh, NC

Persons in Poverty (Wake County)⁵: 8.4%

development program tailored to the specific needs of the school's students and staff. This school-wide staff training program which contains a heavy emphasis on teacher-coaching, positive school climate, culturally relevant teaching, and social-emotional learning was implemented by Peaceful Schools NC during a day long staff retreat kick-off and includes additional sessions taking place throughout the school year. Supporting teachers as they implement appropriate responsive classroom practices allowing for the development of mutually respectful relationships was one aspect of the partnership with Peaceful Schools NC.

A second critical focus of the collaboration targets students' ability to develop similar relationships with each other. Exploris recognized that "*students who have a mentor are more likely to stay in school, attend college, volunteer, hold positions of leadership and become mentors themselves*".⁴ In order to continue developing a positive school culture and building relationships among students and staff, Exploris focused on establishing a [mentoring program](#) that engages older students with younger students. As consultants, Peaceful Schools NC, helped Exploris design their student mentoring program, training teachers and students and acting as a thought partner to develop and pilot the new program. The model developed, partners eighth grade mentors with sixth grade students and fifth graders are mentoring kindergarteners. Although this program is in its first year of implementation, the school is already experiencing tremendous, positive benefits to students' social-emotional well-being.

Results

Exploris reports that students who participated in the mentoring program express feeling more connected to the school, their community, and to one another. Kindergarteners now see fifth graders as mentors, helpers, and friends. Fifth and eighth graders have a new sense of self because they are respected by their younger mentees.

Challenges

When implementing a new program and training, it is a challenge to establish trust and solicit "buy-in" among the staff. School leadership leaned on those teachers that were supportive of the partnership and training provided by Peaceful Schools NC during this first year of implementation. In order to support the needs of some of the more reluctant adopters, the collaborative team is now working to develop professional training focused on restorative justice practices, a topic that may be viewed as more practical by those who were at first hesitant to engage.

Future Modifications

- Exploris is making adjustments to the student mentoring program. Based on what was learned during the pilot implementation of the mentoring program in year one of the project, the school is developing plans to provide additional supports to sixth and eighth grade teachers.
- In an effort to gain additional staff support in the adoption of additional Peaceful Schools strategies, during the following project year the professional development focus will be on restorative practices especially as it applies to older students.

Critical Components

Getting Started

- The NC ACCESS grant funding opportunity made it possible to establish a collaborative partnership with Peaceful Schools NC and develop both student and staff directed programs aligned with the school's vision and goals. [Peaceful Schools NC](#) is located in Durham NC, but does work throughout North Carolina.
- Once the programs were developed, it was critical to ensure that all staff and those students engaged in the mentoring program were trained by a collaborative team of experts from Peaceful Schools NC and The Exploris School leadership team.

Link to [Peaceful School Contract with The Exploris School](#)

Ongoing Supports

- In future project years, the Exploris leadership team will continue to collaborate with Peaceful Schools NC staff, reflecting and revising their work in order to meet the needs of students and staff at the school.
- In upcoming project years, The Exploris School in collaboration with Peaceful Schools NC will continue to provide professional training for all staff and support as they implement new practices in their classrooms.

Equity Connections

- A language acquisition study found a child in poverty received one positive affirmation for every two reprimands. Meanwhile, children in professional economic groups received one reprimand for every six affirmations (Hart 1995). This data gives us a picture of the chasm between students of different economic classes in regards to socioemotional development. Students in poverty often come to class with the need for affirmation in addition to their educational needs. The implementation of the Peaceful Schools initiative supports educationally disadvantaged students through the creation of positive, affirming school climates.
- One common challenge for students of poverty is the reality of existing in two worlds with conflicting norms. The rules of poverty often require students to be flexible, even reactionary, while the rules of school require planning and forethought (Payne 2008). At the heart of socioemotional learning is the explicit instruction of classroom expectations within the context of relationships.
- Minority students and students with disabilities have historically experienced stronger punishments than their peers, even for less severe violations (Gadd, 2019). When schools train their teachers and staff on restorative justice practices within the Peaceful Schools program, previously disenfranchised student populations are empowered to access education without fear of unjust treatment.

Research

- 1.) Dunbar, C. (October 2004) *Best Practices in Classroom Management*, Michigan State University. Retrieved from http://www.innovativeeducatorsforum.org/Best_practices/Best%20Practices%20in%20Class%20room.pdf

- 2.) Payne, R. (April 2008) ASCD Educational Leadership. *Nine Powerful Practices*. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr08/vol65/num07/Nine-Powerful-Practices.aspx>
- 3.) Peaceful Schools NC (www.peacefulschoolsnc.org/support-for-schools/)
- 4.) Harper, A. (March 6, 2018) Education Dive. *More Students would Benefit from having a mentor*. Retrieved from <https://www.educationdive.com/news/more-students-would-benefit-from-having-a-mentor/518472/>
- 5.) United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts North Carolina, Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/facts/table/NC/PST045219>
- 6.) Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes publishing.
- 7.) Gadd, S., Butler, B. (2019) *Promoting Equity and Inclusion using Restorative Practices for Students With and At Risk for Disabilities*, National Technical Assistance Center on Transition. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED601052.pdf>