

# NC ACCESS BEST PRACTICES



Office of Charter Schools  
**NC ACCESS PROGRAM**  
NC Department of Public Instruction

Equity & School Culture

Restorative Practices

## Positive Thinking and Empathy

### Implementation Description

Guilford Preparatory Academy (GPA), a K-8 school located in Greensboro, NC, is one of the longest running charter schools in the state. They serve a diverse student population with 80% identifying as students of color.

At the beginning of the 2021-22 school year, students returned to in person instruction. After nearly a year and a half of remote learning, school leaders expected some challenges as students readjusted to a traditional school environment. However, they were surprised by the level of need and the significant increase in behavioral issues. Students' social skills seemed to have declined, resulting in increased conflict and lost instructional time. Punitive actions, such as suspensions, proved ineffective in addressing the situation, so the school adopted a restorative practices approach in January. Restorative practices use a student centered methodology, founded on positive relationships and positive reinforcement to help students manage their behavior and conflicts.

School leadership began by contracting with [Akoben](#), an African American owned company that provides restorative practices training and consultation for various organizations. GPA intentionally chose Akoben, because of their success in working with students of color in order to meet the needs of GPA's 80% student population of color. The start of this project involved six GPA staff members visiting a school in Baltimore that has successfully implemented restorative practices. During this visit, the team observed strategies in practice and considered implementing these ideas at GPA. The team of six returned to GPA energized and eager to share their observations. The core team's enthusiasm led to two additional staff members requesting to join the team. These Restorative Practice Champions were ready to develop their own restorative practices program. After the visit to Baltimore, Akoben provided [two full days of in-person training](#) to the entire GPA staff and will provide an additional 5 days of coaching directly with the 8 Restorative Practice Champions. These champions meet

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### About This School

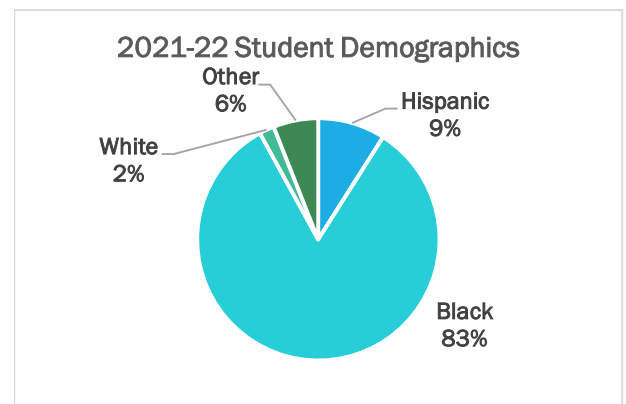
#### Guilford Preparatory Academy

We are a free public school open to all NC students offering a classical style of education, a rigorous curriculum, and a focus on our three core values - courage, respect, and the spirit of adventure. Our mission is to provide a rigorous classical education with high academic and personal expectations that inspires students to be productive and thoughtful citizens in their communities and beyond.

**Year School Opened:** 2001-02

**Grant Awarded:** 2020-21

**Grade Levels Served:** K-8



**% ED Student Population:** 56.2%

**Urbanicity:** Urban / Greensboro, NC

**Persons in Poverty (Guilford County)<sup>5</sup>:** 13.3%

regularly and are tasked with developing the complete restorative practice plan for GPA. As they participate in this work, their goals are to increase their own knowledge and expertise on the topic, ensure consistency and accountability throughout the school, and to provide modeling and support to staff members.

While the development of this program is still underway, GPA has implemented a few initial changes that have been showing a positive impact on students, staff, and families. First, each day begins with upbeat music, and students are encouraged to move to the music during arrival. Parents have taken note of how this change has improved their child's disposition and have expressed their gratitude to staff members. In a parent-principal chat all 4 parents that attended commented on this being something that GPA should continue to do because of the way it helps their child get the day started. Several parents mentioned how if the day did not start off great for their child (or other children) at home that this helps them turn that start around before they even get into the building. Once the day begins, students and staff participate in a school-wide morning meeting via Zoom. These meetings are focused on a topic of the month and include shout outs to recognize individuals for positive behavior and/or accomplishments. For example, in February, they focused on courage and grit, which tied in well with Black History Month. This month's focus is conflict resolution and keeping the peace.



GPA has also introduced restorative circles into their daily class schedule. Restorative circles provide a safe place for students to share what they are feeling and experiencing while inducing a sense of empathy and belonging (McClure, 2016). In addition, research has found a direct connection between empathy and learning capacity especially as it relates to critical thinking skills (Briggs, 2014). Although these strategies have only been in place for a couple of months, there has already been a decrease in fighting, fewer referral and suspensions, and an increase in empathy in both students and staff. These positive results align well with research which shows that teaching children how to empathize results in healthier relationships, a reduction in conflicts, and a readiness for learning (Goodstart, 2018). The restorative circle time facilitates two way communication between students and staff allowing teachers to better understand students' emotional and physical needs. Consequently, there has been an increase of staff empathy which transfers into the classroom.

**Results**

Although the Restorative Practices Program is in the developmental phase at GPA, the school is already seeing positive outcomes. Parents are excited knowing that their students are happy and motivated from their arrival experience. Students and staff are showing empathy, using learned strategies for resolving conflicts, and demonstrating positive behavior. These changes have increased students' on task learning time, and behavior referrals have decreased as shown in the table to the right which was shared at the March 2022 Board Meeting.

October	20 suspensions
November	13 suspensions
December	9 suspensions
January	6 suspensions
February	9 suspensions
March	3 suspensions

## Challenges

As with anything new, change is always a challenge, and eliciting staff buy-in can produce many hurdles. Some staff members fear the approach may not work as intended and will increase the workload. Consistent implementation and proof of success serve to overcome these challenges as GPA is already experiencing positive outcomes associated with these changes.

Consistency of implementation throughout the entire school is also a challenge. School leadership addresses this need by training all staff, implementing schoolwide morning meetings, and utilizing restorative circles.

## Future Modifications

As GPA moves forward with their restorative practices, it will be important to provide additional coaching sessions for champions and further develop the framework under which they work.

The 2021-22 focus has been on student empathy, additionally it will be important to extend this idea to ensure that there is empathy between students and staff and among the staff themselves. Recognition of staff successes is another way to provide emotional support to staff so they are better able to be supportive of students.

## Critical Components

### Getting Started

An essential element to implementation was the creation of the Restorative Practice Champions team and their visit to observe restorative practices successfully utilized at a model school.

### Ongoing Supports

Continued development of the Restorative Practices Champions will be critical to the ongoing success of this program. This team will continue to expand and refine the program to provide support to all staff.

## Equity Connections

Ongoing data has shown that students of color receive more in-school disciplinary action than their same age peers. In fact, African American students “represent 15% of the student population, but account for 33% of out of school suspensions.” (Gadd, 2019) Additionally, inequalities also exist among students with disabilities who “make up 14% of enrollment, but receive 25% of suspensions” (Gadd, 2019) Therefore, an innovative, rather than punitive, approach to classroom management and school discipline facilitates a more equitable environment ensuring students who are most at risk receive fair treatment and the necessary skills to navigate conflict.

## Research

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