

# Austin Independent School District Culturally Responsive and Restorative Practices Final Evaluation Report

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*Grant U411C170017*

DECEMBER 2022



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## Abstract

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Over a 4-year period, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) launched Culturally Responsive and Restorative Practices (CRRP), which is a program that blends restorative practices with culturally responsive pedagogical approaches. CRRP was implemented in 10 of the districts' schools (six elementary and four middle schools). The objective was to build supports for the district's multi-tiered system of support. Tier 1 focused on building community, Tier 2 on building relationships in these schools, and Tier 3 on reintegrating students. The program sought to influence positive behavioral change among staff, students, and parents toward building a school community and positive school climate.

The evaluation of CRRP included implementation and outcome evaluations. The implementation evaluation found that by the end of the third year of implementation, CRRP had gained traction across the 10 schools in AISD; however, it had not yet become engrained in the school culture and community. In interviews, Restorative Practices (RP) associates provided examples of how CRRP succeeded in their schools, including having teachers lead their own circles with students, engaging teams in book discussions, planning collaboratively with educators and school leaders, and leading professional learning sessions for educators. The successes identified focused on Tier 1 implementation, which was consistent with the enacted goal for the CRRP team. Because of disruptions to schooling and standardized testing, the outcome evaluation was not a strong test of CRRP. The outcome study used a propensity matching quasi-experimental design. Results showed that students in CRRP schools perceived relationships with adults more favorably than their peers in non-CRRP schools. A moderation analysis revealed that students in schools implementing CRRP who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or multiracial had fewer disciplinary incidents than similar students in comparison schools. Additionally, the results identified a trend showing that students in CRRP schools, who received special education services, had slightly higher math scores on state assessments than similar students in comparison schools. There were no differences for discipline, attendance or academic achievement for CRRP students compared to their matched peers. Teacher outcomes also showed no differences between CRRP and comparison conditions. Threshold levels of agreement on climate surveys in the last year of the study did meet or exceed the aimed-for levels for teachers and students.

Overall, this study did not demonstrate a strong effect of CRRP but did identify some promising findings in the exploratory analyses of outcomes as a function of CRRP implementation.

## Background

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Suspensions and expulsions are derailing young peoples' lives across the nation's schools. Longitudinal and multivariate studies demonstrate that exclusionary discipline is related to various short- and long-term negative consequences, including academic disengagement, lower academic achievement, school dropout, and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

Findings like these have led the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice and the Council of State Governments Justice Center (Morgan et al., 2014) to recommend reducing reliance on suspensions in favor of alternative practices. Now more than ever, policymakers and educators need alternative tools to prevent disciplinary problems and provide fair interventions when they do occur.

Students with disabilities and students of color are disproportionately affected by punitive disciplinary practices, with the highest rates of suspensions, expulsions, and subsequent delinquent pathways via the school-to-prison pipeline.

Research has exposed the meteoric rise of suspensions and expulsions in Texas for low-level disciplinary infractions, particularly among students of color and special education students (Fabelo et al., 2011). The study found that a much larger percentage of African American (26%) and Hispanic students (18%) were placed in out-of-school suspensions for their first violation than were White students (10%) (Fabelo et al., 2011). Although this report focuses on Texas, it has national significance, because Texas has the second largest public school system, with a student population whose diversity increasingly typifies many school systems.

Austin, recently deemed the most economically segregated city in America (Florida & Mellander, 2015), faces unique challenges in equitably serving its students, two thirds of whom are Hispanic and/or low income. Recent disciplinary referral rates further highlight the need in Austin schools: Among elementary schools in Austin Independent School District (AISD), the average disciplinary referral rate for African American students was five times greater than the referral rate for White students. The average middle school referred African American students four times as often than White students, and Hispanic students were referred twice as often as White students. One middle school referred African American students at a rate 34 times that of White students.

Young adolescents are experiencing rapid changes in their physical, emotional, and interpersonal development when they move from elementary to middle schools (Crockett et al., 1989; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). These experiences have been linked to difficulties in behavioral and emotional adjustment (Eccles et al., 1993). Research also shows an increase in student discipline problems when students transition from elementary to middle school (Theriot & Dupper, 2009).

AISD discipline data substantiate that disciplinary referrals increase at points of transition: In fall 2015, only 5% of fifth grade elementary students received disciplinary referrals, compared with approximately 26% of sixth grade middle school students.

Research evaluating the effect of the restorative-practices (RP) whole-school change approach is in its nascent stages, with few studies using empirical evidence to support their claims. Most of the existing case studies and emerging comparison studies in Minnesota, California, Colorado, and Florida have focused on RP models used as an alternative to selected types of exclusionary disciplinary practices at the secondary level (McCluskey et al., 2008). This study is novel because it rigorously assessed RP as a whole-school approach, affecting all students. Additionally, this study provides empirical evidence of the effect of an on-campus RP coordinator. Findings from existing evaluations suggest RP models lead to reduced use of out-of-school suspension (Karp & Breslin, 2001; Armour, 2013). In addition to reductions in disciplinary infractions and dropout rates, McMorris and colleagues (2013) found that secondary students participating in RP reported greater connection to school. However, few studies have examined the link between quality of RP implementation in classrooms and student outcomes (McCluskey et al., 2008).

A review of the literature suggests a gap in the research on implementation of RP at the elementary level. Furthermore, no studies have examined the effect of continuous exposure to RP in elementary and middle school in terms of short- and long-term academic and non-academic outcomes of students (including the closing of gaps between student groups). Such longitudinal studies are needed to assess the longer-term developmental effects of an intervention, because research has shown that disciplinary suspensions at ages 6–11 are strong predictors of serious or violent offending at ages 15–25 (Wilson, Lipsey, & Soydan, 2003).

With funding from an Education Innovation and Research grant, AISD adopted the Culturally Responsive Restorative Practices (CRRP) program in the 2018–19 school year. The goal for this program was to adopt an RP approach that fit within the district’s multi-tiered system of support. Tier 1 of CRRP focused on building community, and was the primary focus of implementation during the period of this grant. CRRP’s Tier 2 work focuses on building relationships in these schools, and Tier 3 on reintegrating students. The program sought to

influence positive behavioral change among staff, students, and parents toward building a school community and positive school climate.

## Study Description

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### Research Questions

1. How does the CRRP intervention affect students' academic (i.e., STAAR assessment scores), behavioral (i.e., discipline referrals), and social-behavioral (e.g., SEL skills, school climate) outcomes relative to comparison students in Grades 5–8?
2. What is the effect of the CRRP intervention on students' academic and social-behavioral outcomes between the 2018–19 and 2020–21 school years relative to comparison students in Grades 5–8?
3. How does the CRRP intervention affect students' perceptions of their classroom climate and student disciplinary referrals?
4. What is the effect of the CRRP intervention on teachers' attitudes about their teaching experiences (e.g., school climate, job satisfaction), instructional quality, and retention rates?
5. What is the effect of the CRRP intervention on teachers' practices and social-behavioral outcomes over between the 2018–19 and 2020–21 school years?
6. How are the effects of the CRRP intervention moderated by:
  - Student factors (i.e., race/ethnicity, economic disadvantage, and English learner status) and academic performance at baseline?
  - School factors (i.e., percent racial/ethnic minority students, percent EL students, and percent economically disadvantaged students)?
  - Teacher factors (i.e., teaching experience, level of education, and race/ethnicity)?
7. Is there a statistically significant relationship between teacher fidelity of implementation and student outcomes?

### Intervention Condition

AISD began implementing restorative practices, a proactive and inclusionary schoolwide approach to climate and discipline, within a feeder pattern of elementary and middle schools populated by the district's neediest students in the fall of 2018. AISD's whole-school CRRP model was embedded within the district's multi-tiered system of supports to build community (Tier 1), rebuild relationships (Tier 2), and reintegrate students (Tier 3). Building upon existing Tier 1 supports, including social-emotional learning, the AISD CRRP model sought to influence positive behavioral change among staff, students, and parents, and build school community and a positive school climate. The approach included immersing the whole school community in activities that focus on relationships and creating shared values, through inclusive decision making, affective statements, respect agreements, impromptu restorative chats, and community-building circles (carefully planned, healing discussions inspired by Native American



cultures). At Tier 2, CRRP processes, such as harm circles, mediation, or family-group conferencing, was used to repair individual and relational harms resulting from fights, disruptions, and other hurtful exchanges. Beginning in 2016–17, the district piloted a restorative reintegration of students transitioning from the disciplinary Alternative Learning Center to their home campuses. Specifically, a point person at the students' home campuses (a Transition Facilitator) who has been trained in basic CRRP supports connected with support staff for Tier 3, initiates and maintained contact with students during their alternate placement, and supported their successful reintegration through one-on-one conversations and reentry/welcome circles.

RP, in contrast to traditional approaches to school climate and discipline, supports the safety, well-being, and success of students by developing positive relationships, fostering school connectedness, and building social and emotional competencies. Specifically, RP not only provides effective responses when incidents of disruption and harm have occurred (i.e., viable alternatives to removing students from classroom activities), but also offers methods and a framework for teachers and administrators to work with young people to build respectful relationships (Sumner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010).

The premise of CRRP highlights the pivotal role of relationships in every student's educational experience and development (Osher et al., 2018). Safe and supportive relationships include those with educators, parents, peers, and others in the community. To address the importance of safe and supportive relationships in AISD's schools, families, and communities, CRRP provides an RP associate in 10 of the district's schools (six elementary schools and four middle schools). This student-focused model frames the school-level climate and culture, ultimately preparing all students for college, career, and life. CRRP in AISD builds on the foundation set out by Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2015), which is based on seven core assumptions about human beings and aligned to the Response to Intervention model (Morrison, 2005). Core assumptions are basic ideas that we believe to be true about human nature and our relationship with the world. It is important to be aware of one's core assumptions, because what we believe to be true shapes what we see. The seven core assumptions frame the entry point to conversations with educators, students, families, and community members, because they use simple language that opens the door to talk about the way we engage on the Restorative Continuum (McCold & Wachtel, 2001) to maintain harmony in the school environment and get students back to Tier 1 community building.

The seven core assumptions are as follows:

- The true self in everyone is good, wise, and powerful.
- The world is profoundly interconnected.

- All human beings have a deep desire to be in a good relationship.
- All humans have gifts, and everyone is needed for what they bring.
- Everything we need to make positive change is already here.
- Human beings are holistic.
- We need practices to build habits of living from the core self.

The CRRP model takes a relational approach to teaching academic, social, emotional, and behavioral skills. This approach is both culturally relevant and responsive, focused on using affective statements and affective questions as well as engaging in restorative chats to build community at Tier 1 of the Response to Intervention model. These practices are also used at Tiers 2 and 3 as processes to resolve conflict, heal relationships, and teach the skills necessary for adults and students to contribute to a safe and welcoming school and classroom community.

RP within the context of CRRP differs from the restorative justice initiatives in other districts in that RP is viewed as being essential to education as a profession where educators work with students whose lives have been deeply affected by social conditions and problems outside of the school setting. CRRP has a focus on awareness of the identity and culture of students and educators that allows those students and educators to avoid hurting each other and gives them skills to resolve differences and heal the pain when harm occurs. Of significance is that RP, as implemented in AISD, draws from practices that are thousands of years old, originating in indigenous communities around the world. In indigenous communities there is a strong sense of identity, harmony, and community, rather than the punitive attitude of restorative justice as implemented in the U.S. judicial system.

CRRP supports the safety, well-being, and success of students by developing trusting relationships, fostering school connectedness, and building social and emotional competencies. Specifically, RP not only provides effective responses when incidents of disruption and harm occur (i.e., viable alternatives to removing students from classroom activities), but also offers methods and a framework for teachers and administrators to work with young people to build respectful relationships (Gregory et al., 2020; Sumner et al., 2010). To facilitate this process, RP associates are embedded within each school to support staff and students in implementing CRRP.

While developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, students improve persistence at academic tasks and engage in positive interactions with peer educators, leading to higher engagement, less emotional distress, and, ultimately, higher academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). This connection between life skills and school performance is particularly true for the high-need students that the project targeted (Heckman & Kautz, 2013). Schools that emphasize the establishment of caring relationships for students with peers and adults in their

schools have shown improved achievement, behavior, and attachment to schools, teachers, and peers (Gregory et al., 2010). Researchers have suggested that positive student–teacher relationships benefit students of color even more than White students (Gay, 2000). This project examines the effects of RP on both student outcomes and on teacher attitudes and behaviors.

Because the focus is on inclusion and community-based problem solving, RP centers community while simultaneously addressing harm and co-creating a climate with students that promotes healthy relationships, builds community in and out of school, develops social-emotional understanding and skills, increases social and human resources, and enhances teaching and learning (Armour, 2013). Recent reviews of research suggest RP holds promise for increasing a sense of community, reducing the use of exclusionary discipline, and narrowing racial disparities in suspension (see Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory & Evans, 2020). As noted by Gregory et al. (2020), to support RP, schools must be ready to implement and have strong support and engagement from leaders, educators, and staff. A core assumption of AISD is that leaders across schools implementing CRRP are supportive and engaged and will share this level of engagement and support with their educators and staff as they move forward practicing and implementing CRRP. Guiding the implementation of CRRP are five key components:

- Component 1: Educators know their own cultural and racial lens and understand the effects that their biases, values, prejudices, and beliefs have on students’ safety, sense of belonging, and academic success.
- Component 2: There is a safe and supportive classroom environment that connects cultural and community-based knowledge through structures, processes, and protocols.
- Component 3: Students, educators, parents, and caregivers have a sense of belonging and identity safety. Each and all are personally affirmed, accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school environment.
- Component 4: Educators are facilitators of learning who vary their methods of teaching, employ asset-based pedagogy, and connect cultural and community-based knowledge in their classroom experiences to draw on students’ funds of knowledge so that students from diverse groups can learn and succeed to the greatest extent possible.
- Component 5: School culture proactively and universally affirms relationships and accepts conflict as normal and natural. Educators develop social and emotional skills for themselves and students through processes that strengthen relationships, repair harm, maintain trust, hold individuals and groups accountable, and contribute to harmony.

## Setting

The evaluation took place within AISD, which contains 81 elementary schools and 18 middle schools. Six elementary and four middle schools implemented the CRRP intervention; fifteen matched schools served as comparisons.

## Comparison Condition

AIR's evaluation of AISD's CRRP intervention included a comparison group of elementary and middle schools and students. For non-CRRP school and its students to be eligible for inclusion in the evaluation, the school must not have been implementing an CRRP program or similar practices. These schools conducted business as usual, and students were not exposed to CRRP practices. Teachers, students, and families were asked to complete a school climate survey annually, which included items related to CRRP activities. The school climate survey ensured that we were able to determine what SEL practices were present within our comparison schools, thus informing the treatment contrast.

## Study Participants

### Selection of Schools

Four middle schools and six elementary schools were selected to compose the treatment group and receive the CRRP intervention. The four middle schools selected by AISD were primarily Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and lower achieving. They also have some of the highest rates of disciplinary referrals in AISD. AISD selected the six elementary schools based on feeder patterns to the selected middle schools. Average student characteristics of the 10 middle and elementary schools selected to receive the CRRP intervention are shown in Exhibit 1.

### Exhibit 1. Average Demographic Characteristics and Achievement Levels of Target Middle Schools

Demographic Characteristics	Middle Schools	Elementary Schools
Hispanic	81%	76%
Black	14%	8%
White	3%	13%
Asian	1%	1%
Other race/ethnicity	1%	2%
Economically disadvantaged	91%	76%
At risk for dropout	83%	69%
English learner	52%	51%
Special education	16%	8%
<b>Achievement levels</b>		
ELA proficiency rate	59%	75%
Math proficiency rate	65%	81%
<b>Discipline</b>		
Discipline referrals per student	200.8	5.33

The CRRP intervention was implemented at the school level and did not include random assignment of teachers or students. Thus, to identify and create the comparison group, the evaluation employed propensity score matching. This approach allowed AIR to identify schools that are similar to those receiving the CRRP intervention on a variety of observed characteristics

but were not selected to receive the intervention. The following model was used to calculate the propensity score for each school.

$$P(X_i) = \Pr(D_i = 1|X_i)$$

where  $X_i$  is a vector of observed characteristics. Variables included in the school model were school demographic characteristics (e.g., racial/ethnic composition), achievement (e.g., percent passing the STAAR mathematics and reading assessments), percent special education, percent economically disadvantaged, number of discipline referrals, and percent English learners.

After a propensity score was calculated for each school, a nearest-neighbor matching algorithm was employed to match each school to a similar school in AISD that had not been selected to receive the intervention. Matching was conducted separately for middle schools and elementary schools. Each treatment middle school was matched to one similar comparison school, and each elementary school was matched to two similar comparison schools. The research team examined the balance of treatment and matched comparison schools on observable characteristics, adjusting the models if residual imbalance remained. Initial school-level occurred during winter/spring 2019, prior to the beginning of the 2019–20 school year.

### ***Selection of Students***

Once schools were matched, all students in participating grades (see Exhibit 3 for information on intervention rollout across grades) in CRRP intervention schools were matched with similar students in a matched non-CRRP school using propensity score matching. Students were matched using the same propensity score method described above. At the student level, variables included in the model were demographic characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status), school program participation (i.e., special education status, English learner status), academic achievement (i.e., STAAR mathematics and reading scores), and disciplinary referrals. Student-level matching occurred at the end of the 2019–20 school year, prior to conducting the first round of outcome analyses.

### ***Selection of Teachers***

All teachers in participating grades in CRRP and non-CRRP schools were included in the evaluation each year (see Exhibit 3 for information on intervention rollout across grades). Due to sample size issues, teachers were not matched across CRRP and non-CRRP schools. For this reason, these analyses are considered exploratory. However, baseline equivalence among participating teachers was assessed, and teacher characteristics were included as controls in all analyses.

## Sample Sizes

Exhibit 2 presents school and student sample sizes, overall and by condition. As described above, each of the six elementary schools was matched with two comparison schools, and each of the middle schools was matched with one comparison school. One-year effects were estimated for students in Grades 5–8. Thus, there were a total of 25 schools included in the analyses for 1-year effects. Two-year effects were estimated for students in Grades 7 and 8 only. There were a total of eight schools included in the 2-year outcome analyses.

Each of the six elementary schools was expected to have a minimum of three teachers per grade, while each of the four middle schools was expected to have a minimum of six teachers per grade. Moreover, each of the elementary schools was expected to have a minimum of 75 students per grade, while each of the middle schools was expected to have a minimum of 150 students per grade.

### Exhibit 2. Number of Schools, Students, and Teachers in the Evaluation

Sample	Treatment Group			Comparison Group		
	Schools	Students	Teachers	Schools	Students	Teachers
1-year effects	10	3184	110	15	3478	123
2-year effects	4	2297	82	4	2491	95

Note. See Exhibit 3 for information on grades included in 1-year and 2-year effects.

For each year of implementation, students were tracked over time to monitor crossovers (i.e., comparison group members who inadvertently participate in the intervention) using the administrative data provide to AIR by AISD. Crossovers remained in the intent-to-treat analyses in their originally assigned condition. Exhibit 3 shows the grade levels that were tracked across the study. Students experienced up to 2 years of exposure to CRRP.

### Exhibit 3. Grade Levels Included in 1-Year and 2-Year Outcome Analyses

Academic Year	Grade 3 Cohort	Grade 4 Cohort	Grade 5 Cohort	Grade 6 Cohort
2018–19	Baseline (Grade 3)	Baseline (Grade 4)	Baseline (Grade 5)	Baseline (Grade 6)
2019–20	COVID (Grade 4)	COVID (Grade 5)	COVID (Grade 6)	COVID (Grade 7)
2020–21 RP implemented	Year 1 (Grade 5)	Year 1 (Grade 6)	Year 1 (Grade 7)	Year 1 (Grade 8)
2021–22 Follow-up		Year 2 (Grade 7)	Year 2 (Grade 8)	

## Implementation Study

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### Introduction

During the course of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on the educational experiences of students and families in AISD. In 2020–21, the district started the school year virtually and offered in-person learning for students based on the prevalence of COVID in the Austin community. Over the course of the school year, students spent most of their time engaged in virtual learning and, when in school, in smaller classrooms. The climate created and supported by educators became even more important for students who were experiencing trauma linked to the pandemic as well as the global focus on the social justice movement.

This section of the report focuses on the implementation of CRRP, across its five components in 10 Austin ISD schools. CRRP approaches each school as a unique context and shifts implementation support based on school, student, educator, family, and community needs. To facilitate implementation, RP associates collaborate with each school’s community to establish a team to guide implementation and identify opportunities to strengthen relationships and connections while honoring the pivotal roles of race and culture.

Implementation of CRRP began during the 2018–19 school year, and AIR gathered qualitative data on this implementation. During the first year, a strong focus was placed on relationship- and trust-building activities in each of the 10 schools. The CRRP team also placed a strong emphasis on creation of a community for the RP associates in order to support their professional development and planning. For the 2020–21 school year, AIR continued the formative implementation study to help guide and inform additional components of CRRP to develop and strengthen prior to conducting the summative evaluation in the final year of implementation.

At the end of the 2020–21 school year, AIR staff conducted interviews and focus groups with RP associates and CRRP leaders. Interviews were limited to this group due to the ongoing COVID pandemic. This approach allowed the evaluation team to focus on implementation from the RP associates’ perspective and gather information on how COVID had impacted the roles fulfilled and supports provided by the CRRP team. The formative evaluation was guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent is CRRP implemented with fidelity in EIR classrooms and schools?
- What are barriers to fully implemented CRRP in EIR classrooms and schools?



The following sections of this report present the implementation findings from the development phase of CRRP.

## **Implementation Study Methods**

AIR's implementation evaluation used qualitative evaluation techniques to gather information on the level of implementation in each of the 10 CRRP schools. The study team conducted interviews with RP associates, principals, CRRP teachers, and CRRP leaders as well as focus groups with CRRP campus leadership teams. This section provides information on the schools implementing CRRP as well as the data collection methods used to measure implementation.

## **Sample**

The Austin ISD team worked collaboratively with partners to develop and implement CRRP across 10 schools in the district. Four middle schools and six elementary schools were selected to form the treatment group and receive the CRRP intervention. The participating middle schools were identified based on disparities in student discipline and academic achievement. The middle schools also serve primarily Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students and have some of the highest rates of disciplinary referrals and the largest gaps in achievement within Austin ISD. The elementary schools were selected from schools that volunteered to participate, many of which already had initial steps aligned to CRRP thinking (e.g., Community in Schools, No Place for Hate). The elementary schools were selected through a process that included a review of district feeder patterns into (and away from) the selected middle schools. The final sample of elementary schools had already demonstrated an interest in implementing practices aligned with CRRP.

## **Data Sources**

During the third year of implementation, the AIR evaluation team focused on capturing the level of CRRP implementation and identifying successes and barriers for implementation and overall RP associate activities to build on data gathered in the initial year of implementation. Data were collected through interviews at the end of the 2020–2021 school year. School-level observations were not conducted due to the pandemic and district research restrictions. Exhibit 4 provides information on the types of data (interviews or focus groups) completed in each of the participating schools.



#### Exhibit 4. Respondent Role by School

School	Interviews			Focus group
	RP associate	Principal	Lead teacher	Campus leadership
<b>Elementary schools</b>				
Barrington	▲	▲	▲	
Becker	▲	▲	▲	▲
Blanton	▲	▲	▲	▲
Blazier	▲	▲	▲	▲
Cook	▲	▲	▲	
Pickle	▲	▲	▲	▲
<b>Middle schools</b>				
Burnet	▲			
Dobie	▲	▲	▲	▲
Garcia	▲	▲	▲	▲
Mendez	▲	▲		

One principal interview and two lead teacher interviews were not completed due to scheduling issues. In addition, four focus groups with campus leadership were not completed. In two instances, the campus leadership teams were no longer meeting; in the other two instances, scheduling was an issue.

#### Interviews

The AIR evaluation team conducted interviews with the six RP associates in spring 2021. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and focused on CRRP experiences in the RP associates' schools as well as challenges, additional resources, and successes in implementing CRRP and engaging staff, students, and families in their schools. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to support analysis. Similar interview protocols were used to guide interviews with 9 of the 10 principals and 8 of the 10 CRRP lead teachers.

The study team also conducted interviews with Austin ISD's CRRP leadership team, which consisted of the project director and project coordinator. Both have pivotal roles in the development of CRRP, supporting materials, and professional learning for the RP associates. The project coordinator worked directly with the RP associates to support their development and implementation of the program and oversaw progress in each of the participating schools. The project director resigned from Austin ISD in January 2021.

## Focus Groups

The AIR evaluation team completed focus groups, when possible, with the CRRP campus leadership teams, comprising school leaders, educators, parents, and community members. The focus groups were guided by similar topics as the interviews and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The study team completed focus groups in 6 of the 10 schools.

## Implementation Study Findings

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Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed using NVivo to identify themes in the data. This section shares the findings from the qualitative analysis that was performed.

### Implementation Overview

During the third year of implementation, many of the RP associates experienced challenges with full implementation of CRRP due to the amount of virtual learning across the district. However, in a few schools the RP associates estimated their level of universal implementation was above 50% in terms of educators' use of CRRP. There was a high level of variation in the level of implementation (25% to 80%) across a given school, which demonstrated the strong impact of the community and individual RP associate context on ability to implement CRRP and engage with their school. However, Tier 2 and 3 levels of implementation were low across all of the schools (0% to 15%). The most common activities reported by RP associates included leading circles, participating/leading CRRP core team meetings, and participating in CRRP RP associate meetings and community of practice gatherings. The level of other activities (i.e., teacher professional learning opportunities, participation in planning discussions, and leading circles with educators) varied by campus and RP associate.

### Highlights of RP Associates' Experiences

The year was an immense challenge for all RP associates. The challenges related to building trust and helping teachers, school leaders, and staff while also dealing with the pandemic's impact created a high level of anxiety. RP associates shared deep concern about their safety related to being on campus with students during the pandemic as well as the emotional toll of supporting others as they experienced the pandemic. One RP associate described struggling with trust issues related to reporting of COVID cases in her school, which was in a community with a high rate of COVID infection. This led to a lower level of implementation in those schools with trust and safety issues. In other schools, there was increased reliance on and connection with the RP associates to provide mental health support to educators and students as they experienced the pandemic. This was often a shared experience across RP associates who spent a significant amount of time on their campus and were visible to educators.

Strong bonds formed among the RP associates, as described by each of them independently, and they built a community of support among themselves. A programming decision was made during the initial year of implementation to reserve Fridays for RP associates' own professional development, and this was maintained throughout the project. This strategic planning established a regular meeting time for the team to share the difficulties at their respective schools, but as the school year continued, they had successes to celebrate as well. By serving as resources to each other, RP associates learned about implementation of CRRP at a deeper level and strengthened the skills and knowledge needed for their work. The RP associates formed their own community using the tenets of CRRP where trust was high; they could discuss even the most difficult aspects of their work and celebrate every success at their schools and in their personal/professional growth.

Most RP associates described points in the school year when their challenges were great enough that they were uncertain about continuing the work due to the ongoing pandemic. All the RP associates noted feeling unsafe at some point during the school year, especially after they were required to return to campus. The psycho-emotional weight of being in their schools during the pandemic while also tracking the number of COVID cases in their school community (and in some instances the death of a community member) took a toll on all the RP associates. They demonstrated resilience, integrity, and commitment to idealism as they endured the painful difficulties and continued their work. Additionally, they were supporting educators and students through the heightened social justice movement and a tense political climate, which tested their ability to be supportive of all educators and families. Even in the schools where there was strong support for CRRP among leaders, teachers, and staff, RP associates had moments of extreme stress as they witnessed students in traumatizing situations and other disappointments with staff (i.e., lack of CRRP implementation, devaluing students' race and culture).

RP associates were knowledgeable about the need for self-care as a means of protecting and strengthening their psycho-emotional health and had individual strategies for accomplishing that. An important point is that their acknowledgment of the emotional toll of working with students in the settings where they were assigned allowed them to address their own psycho-emotional needs. Instead of a typical professional culture that keeps distance between emotional life and job duties, the RP associates maintained a professional culture that allowed them to deal with themselves as whole persons while always being available to each other during particularly difficult times. They also found support when discussing with the CRRP project coordinator the issues they faced at their schools; the project coordinator would find professional strategies for them to pursue alongside psycho-emotional support for the emotional trauma they were facing.

The majority of RP associates were able to identify successes in their schools, which generally included changes in behavior of school staff, leaders, and/or teachers. In some cases, the successes led to deeper relationships with educators and school leaders. Many of the RP associates received requests to lead circles at the schools—with both educators and students—to support trust building and healing. In other cases, a significant success would be a teacher’s willingness to participate in a circle. The success in those cases was the teacher and/or staff acknowledgment that the techniques had merit regarding their own healing.

### **Summary of Principal and Lead Teacher Interviews**

The majority of principals and lead teachers, across the schools indicated that CRRP had been implemented successfully at their schools by offering emotional support to students and educators, which was especially needed during this school year. Principals noted a heavier reliance on their RP associate to provide support to educators and guide race-focused discussions linked to the social justice movement. A few principals noted that their RP associate had not been present during the previous school year and had not moved CRRP forward. They said that the RP associate’s hesitancy to be on campus, or to be isolated on campus, meant they weren’t included in school community-building experiences. Other principals described their RP associate as being “right in the middle of it” when they were engaging teachers to better understand how race plays a role in interactions and how to be antiracist.

Almost all principals were able to articulate the core components of CRRP and provide examples of how their community reflected each component. Principals highlighted the importance of establishing strong and trusting relationships with families and reflecting on the importance of race. One noted that “race plays a role in all of our interactions and the need to be antiracist”. Another indicated their RP associate had provided teachers with the knowledge, resources, and support to be more antiracist and increase teachers’ awareness of implicit biases.

All lead teachers shared positive relationships and experiences with their RP associates. These teachers were able to articulate the core components of CRRP in a descriptive manner to demonstrate their knowledge about and familiarity with each component. A few noted that their fellow educators had a “much deeper” knowledge of the core components at this point in implementation; however, they were unsure if interactions with students had shifted to reflect knowledge. Each lead teacher also noted it was a challenging year for implementation due to the mixed delivery model and having fewer students attending school due to the pandemic. Some lead teachers found that more educators had been open to CRRP through circles over the past school year; however, there was also limited participation in CRRP activities due to virtual learning.

The majority of lead teachers noted that the RP associates had provided some form of professional learning for educators at their school. The descriptions varied from leading professional learning to informally providing resources and supports. One lead teacher noted the ability of other educators to now lead circles and engage their students in ways that align with CRRP to create a sense of belonging.

### **Summary of CRRP Core Campus Team Focus Groups**

The focus groups demonstrated a wide range of responses and levels of awareness and participation indicating commitment to CRRP components. The schools with the strongest examples of CRRP components exhibited a greater openness to making changes for school improvement and appeared to be building trust, creating a sense of belonging, and ensuring their school communities were antiracist. In the majority of focus groups, participants were open to sharing their experiences and perspectives on the progress of CRRP in their schools. However, two schools (one elementary and one middle) did not have core campus teams in place to participate in a focus group primarily due to COVID and lack of engagement on their campuses. For two other campuses, focus groups were not conducted due to scheduling issues because the core campus teams were no longer meeting that late in the school year.

Almost all schools demonstrated CRRP core campus teams operating with full commitment to the CRRP components even where they were not fully implemented. These schools had several examples of early to mid-range behaviors in implementation and were confident of continued success in the coming school year. Most schools were between these two points on a continuum of commitment to CRRP components. In each of the CRRP core campus team focus groups, participants talked about most of the five components at least at a superficial level as if in the earliest phases of developing the practices. No group was able to discuss all five components as taking place at their school. Most groups were able to talk about students' families and the community as being involved in the school, although the degree of involvement and strength of those relationships varied among the schools. The focus group participants tended to be fairly candid; some said that their teachers and staff did not talk about racial identity and culture, whereas others were actively working to promote all of the student cultures in their schools.

All CRRP core campus team members understood the role and work of the RP associates. They highlighted the importance of the RP associates' role in the school and the support they offered to educators and students during the pandemic. Focus group participants also highlighted the need for RP associates to continue supporting CRRP into the next school year and beyond. Across focus groups, participants noted that it had been a challenging school year for the RP associates. In a few schools, the focus group participants noted their RP associate had not been as "visible" this past year due to COVID. All said their RP associate had been available and ready

to support the school community, teachers, and staff with a variety of efforts, ideas, and resources.

### **Austin ISD Support for the CRRP Initiative**

Prior to the start of the 2020–2021 school year, there was a shift in district leadership and its organizational structure. Several leaders shifted departments and/or left the district. This created a disruption in the level of support for CRRP at the district leadership level and across the schools. In addition, one of the RP associates transitioned into a new district leadership role, which left the need for replacement. The project director worked collaboratively with the project coordinator to hire a new RP associate before the beginning of the school year. A final shift occurred in February 2021, when the project director left the district and leadership responsibilities shifted to the project coordinator. During all of this, the CRRP team was grappling with the effects of the social justice movement and the ongoing pandemic. Throughout the myriad of changes in leadership and the community context, the CRRP team was genuine in its support of the basic tenets of CRRP, so much so that the team members incorporated those values and ways of operating into all aspects of their work. The result was a strong community in which they supported each other through troubling and painful times and celebrated all successes and good news together. Their full embrace of all things CRRP makes their views about the initiative essential to fully understanding what unfolded the first year and how it all happened.

The continued protection of RP associate time to deliver CRRP became pivotal to the team during the past school year. Pressure mounted for schools to utilize RP associates in different ways, including as social and emotional learning representatives assigned to other schools. CRRP leaders were able to push back and protect RP associates' time and ensure they could remain dedicated to their schools in alignment with grant requirements.

A key topic about implementation of CRRP concerned the forms and degree of support from the district. The RP associates expressed positive perspectives of the project director and coordinator as leaders of the initiative who each fulfilled her role effectively in supporting CRRP. Some RP associates offered examples of both leaders stepping in to advocate on behalf of RP associates during particularly difficult events or decisions in their schools. Their intervention resulted in RP associates being able to continue their work as needed and feel safe. The strategy of turning to CRRP leaders was reserved for times when typical strategies were unsuccessful. It should be noted that the project director served as a buffer between the CRRP team and the district; however, as she stepped away, the project coordinator took on that role and noted it was a significant challenge given the ever-changing structure of the district.

All RP associates expressed gratitude for the project coordinator's accessibility for troubleshooting, support, and venting throughout the school year. They particularly appreciated the one-on-one meetings with her at their schools that occurred as needed as well as the community of practice she led with them. They noted a high level of collaboration to support implementation and to begin documenting/developing resources for educators, families, and school leaders. All of the RP associates noted that the coordinator's supportive leadership had helped alleviate some of their anxiety related to going back into schools once students had returned. They reflected that she honored their need to feel safe while at the same time encouraging them to engage with educators around CRRP.

In previous years of implementation, three of the RP associates moved between two schools. However, due to COVID and the goal of reducing potential exposure and/or transition, the RP associates were housed in one of the two schools. While they were not in the other schools, expectations were that they still engaged in CRRP activities with their school leaders and educators across both. Similar to previous years, the RP associates were overwhelmed and stressed due to splitting their time between two schools even with the higher level of flexibility. While no clear solution was posed during discussions, given the consistent surfacing of this concern, CRRP leadership should continue to track and monitor the needs of RP associates working across multiple campuses.

### ***Summary of Implementation Findings***

Implementation of CRRP gained traction across the 10 schools but did not become embedded in the schools' culture and community. All RP associates provided examples of how CRRP has succeeded in their schools, including having teachers lead their own circles with students, engaging teams in book discussions, planning collaboratively with educators and school leaders, and leading professional learning sessions for educators. Due to the unique context of every school, variation in the level of implementation is to be expected.



## Outcome Study

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### Independence of the Outcome Evaluation

AIR conducted an independent and external evaluation of AISD's implementation of its CRRP program. AIR independently conducted all key aspects of the evaluation, including propensity score matching, data analysis, collection of implementation and outcome data (other than extant data collected by AISD through its normal administrative practices), and reporting of study findings. The findings from the study were not subject to the approval of staff from AISD.

### Design

We employed a quasi-experimental evaluation to assess the effectiveness of implementing whole-school CRRP in AISD. Propensity score matching was used to identify comparison schools (n=15) in the district. Implementation began in the 2020–21 school year, and we assessed intervention effectiveness on a range of student- and teacher-level outcomes, including teacher- and student-perceived school climate, academic achievement, and disciplinary incidents at the end of Year 1 (2020–21) and Year 2 (2021–22) of the intervention.

### Measures

#### *Administrative Data*

The evaluation team used extant administrative data from AISD from the 2018–19 school year (baseline) to the first year of implementation (2020–21 school year) and the second year of implementation (2021–22 school year). For Year 1, data included student-level data on school climate and demographic information and teacher-level data on school climate and demographic information. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, student achievement, attendance, and discipline data were not available for the 2020–21 school year. For Year 2, data included student-level data on academic achievement, attendance rates, and disciplinary incidents, and demographic information. AISD implemented a new school climate survey in the 2021–22 school year, and individual-level data for the new survey were not available. Instead, data included school-level data on student and teacher perceptions of school climate.

No teacher-level data were available for Year 2. For all outcomes used in effectiveness analyses, see Exhibit 5.



### ***Year 1 Student-Perceived School Climate***

We assessed student-perceived school climate in the 2020–21 school year using the AISD student climate survey, which includes six subscales. Outcomes included personal development skills, student engagement, behavioral environment, adult relationships, safety and respect, and persistence. Scores could range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating a more favorable school climate. We also created school-level proportions for seven items from the student climate survey (see Exhibit 5), which represent average school proportions of students who agreed that each item was true ‘sometimes’ or a ‘lot of the time’.

### ***Year 1 Teacher-Perceived School Climate***

We assessed teacher-perceived school climate in the 2020–21 school year using the Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) AISD survey, which consisted of 13 subscales. Outcomes included general climate, district vision, principal leadership, school leadership, facilities and resources, teacher leadership, professional development, achievement press, community support and engagement, student conduct, collaboration, data use, and attachment. Scores could range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating a more favorable school climate. We also created school-level proportions for five items from the TELL survey (see Exhibit 5), which represent average school proportions of teachers who ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with each item.

### ***Year 2 Student Achievement***

We examined student achievement in both reading and mathematics in the 2021–22 school year using the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which is administered in the spring of each school year. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the STAAR was not administered in the 2019–20 or 2020–21 school years. We used student scaled scores for the current analyses.

### ***Year 2 Attendance***

We assessed attendance in the 2021–22 school year. Our primary outcome was the percentage of school days attended out of total number of days enrolled.

### ***Year 2 Discipline***

We assessed discipline in the 2021–22 school year. Our primary outcome was the total number of disciplinary incidents. Discipline incidents represent all discipline referrals, excluding discipline incidents occurring off campus or related to truancy.

### ***Year 2 Student-Perceived School Climate***

We used a school-level measure of student-perceived school climate in the 2021–22 school year. The student-perceived school climate survey consisted of five subscales, including belonging, rigorous expectations, safety, school climate, and teacher–student relationships. Scores represented the percentage of students who favorably endorsed each subscale.

### ***Year 2 Teacher-Perceived School Climate***

We used a school-level measure of teacher-perceived school climate in the 2021–22 school year. The teacher-perceived school climate survey consisted of eight subscales, including belonging, cultural awareness and action, district support, feedback and coaching, professional learning, school climate, school leadership, and leadership relationships. Scores represented the percentage of teachers who favorably endorsed each subscale.

### ***Covariates***

We used a standard set of covariates in all analyses. In student-level analyses, demographic variables used as covariates included race/ethnicity (Hispanic [reference], Black or African American, non-Hispanic White, Asian/American Indian and Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander/multiracial), gender (male = 0, female = 1), whether students were considered economically disadvantaged (no = 0, yes = 1), whether students were limited English proficient (no = 0, yes = 1), whether students received special education services (no = 0, yes = 1), and grade. For teacher-level analyses, demographic variables used as covariates included race/ethnicity (Hispanic [reference], Black or African American, non-Hispanic White, Asian/American Indian or Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander/multiracial), gender (male = 0, female = 1), years of experience, and degree (bachelor’s degree [reference], post-graduate degree, or associate’s degree/certificate). For race/ethnicity, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and multiracial categories were collapsed due to small cell sizes. For school-level analyses, we included school-level percentages of all demographic variables as covariates.

## Exhibit 5. Student and Teacher Outcomes

Level	School Year	Outcome Domain	Outcome Measures
Student Level	2020–21	School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Development Skills</li> <li>• Student Engagement</li> <li>• Behavioral Engagement</li> <li>• Adult Relationships</li> <li>• Safety &amp; Respect</li> <li>• Persistence</li> </ul>
	2021–22	Discipline	Total number of disciplinary incidents
	2021–22	Achievement	STAAR reading STAAR mathematics
Teacher Level	2020–21	School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Climate</li> <li>• District Vision</li> <li>• Principal Leadership</li> <li>• School Leadership</li> <li>• Facilities and Resources</li> <li>• Teacher Leadership</li> <li>• Professional Development</li> <li>• Achievement Press</li> <li>• Community Support &amp; Engagement</li> <li>• Student Conduct</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Data Use</li> <li>• Attachment</li> </ul>
School Level	2020-21	Proportions of Student-Perceived School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel safe at my school.</li> <li>• It is easy for me to talk to adults at my school about my problems.</li> <li>• Students at my school follow the school rules.</li> <li>• Students at my school treat teachers with respect.</li> <li>• My classmates behave in the way my teachers want them to.</li> <li>• Adults at my school treat all students fairly.</li> <li>• Adults at my school listen to student ideas and opinions.</li> </ul>
		Proportions of Teacher-Perceived School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.</li> <li>• All campus staff interact with one another in a way that models social and emotional competence.</li> <li>• My principal models social and emotional competence in the way that he/she deals with students and faculty on an everyday basis.</li> </ul>
	2021–22	Student-Perceived School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School staff clearly understand policies and procedures about student conduct.</li> </ul>
		Teacher-Perceived School Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This school’s discipline practices promote social and emotional learning (e.g., developmentally appropriate consequences, restorative practice).</li> </ul>

Note. STAAR = State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness

## Data Analysis and Findings

### Baseline Equivalence

Two analytic samples were created for estimating effects for students after Years 1 and 2. The first analytic sample for the Year 1 outcomes analysis included all students in Grades 5–8 with data at both baseline (2018–19 school year) and Year 1 (2020–21 school year). Individual-level baseline equivalence was established between our treatment and comparison groups in our Year 1 analytic sample on all outcomes assessed in our analysis. (See Exhibit 6.) Absolute effect size differences on main outcomes (i.e., school climate) ranged from 0.03 to 0.19 between treatment and comparison students.

**Exhibit 6. Baseline Equivalence Between Treatment and Comparison Students in the 2020–21 School Year Analytic Sample**

Measure	Comparison Group			Treatment Group			Standardized Difference
	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Personal Development Skills	879	3.19	0.60	935	3.12	0.63	-0.11
Student Engagement	898	3.12	0.68	948	3.10	0.71	-0.03
Behavioral Environment	878	3.13	0.55	941	3.01	0.58	-0.19
Adult Relationships	898	3.45	0.51	957	3.43	0.53	-0.04
Safety & Respect	882	3.26	0.58	938	3.19	0.60	-0.12
Persistence	882	3.28	0.59	928	3.24	0.65	-0.06
Male (%)	898	49.4	-	957	52.8	-	0.08
Limited English Proficient (%)	898	50.6	-	957	63.6	-	0.33
Special Education (%)	898	11.2	-	957	13.8	-	0.14
Economically Disadvantaged (%)	898	84.5	-	957	88.0	-	0.18
Hispanic (%)	898	80.5	-	957	84.6	-	0.17
Black or African American (%)	898	6.9	-	957	6.1	-	-0.08
White (%)	898	9.7	-	957	6.4	-	-0.27
Other Race (%)	898	2.9	-	957	2.9	-	0.00

*Note.* We present means and standard deviations for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g* for continuous variables and Cox's Index for categorical variables.

The second analytic sample for the Year 2 outcomes analysis included all students in Grades 6–8 with data at both baseline (2018–19 school year) and Year 2 (2021–22 school year). Individual-level baseline equivalence was established between our treatment and comparison groups in our Year 2 analytic sample on all outcomes assessed in our analysis (See Exhibit 7.) Absolute effect size differences on main outcomes (i.e., attendance rates, achievement, discipline) ranged from 0.03 to 0.17 between treatment and comparison students. Due to baseline differences between treatment and comparison students in both analytic samples between 0.05 and 0.25, we applied a statistical adjustments to our analysis (What Works Clearinghouse, 2020). This statistical adjustment involved including a baseline measure of the appropriate outcome in each of our models.

### Exhibit 7. Baseline Equivalence Between Treatment and Comparison Students in the 2021–22 School Year Analytic Sample

Measure	Comparison Group			Treatment Group			Standardized Difference
	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Attendance Rates	597	96.20	4.04	907	96.08	4.40	-0.03
STAAR Reading	527	1473.86	187.57	796	1439.71	200.33	-0.17
STAAR Math	462	1521.77	206.28	724	1488.23	217.61	-0.16
Number of Discipline Incidents	597	0.07	0.40	907	0.11	0.86	0.06
Male (%)	597	53.6	-	907	58.8	-	0.13
Limited English Proficient (%)	597	55.8	-	907	71.7	-	0.42
Special Education (%)	597	14.1	-	907	15.7	-	0.08
Economically Disadvantaged (%)	597	88.9	-	907	94.4	-	0.45
Hispanic (%)	597	85.3	-	907	87.9	-	0.14
Black or African American (%)	597	8.0	-	907	7.6	-	-0.03
White (%)	597	4.5	-	907	2.3	-	-0.42
Other Race (%)	597	2.2	-	907	2.2	-	0.00

*Note.* We present means and standard deviations for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. For standardized differences, we present Hedges’ *g* for continuous variables and Cox’s Index for categorical variables. STAAR = State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness.

One analytic sample was created for estimating effects for teachers after Year 1. The analytic sample for the Year 1 outcomes analysis included all teachers who taught in Grades 5 through 8 with data at both baseline (2018–19 school year) and Year 1 (2020–21 school year). Individual-level baseline equivalence was established between our treatment and comparison groups in our Year 1 analytic sample on all outcomes assessed in our analysis. (See Exhibit 8.) Absolute effect size differences on main outcomes (i.e., school climate) ranged from 0.04 and 0.17 between treatment and comparison teachers.

### Exhibit 8. Baseline Equivalence Between Treatment and Comparison Teachers in the 2020–21 School Year Analytic Sample

Measure	Comparison Group			Treatment Group			Standardized Difference
	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation	
General Climate	237	3.11	0.67	158	3.05	0.64	-0.09
District Vision	237	3.23	0.65	156	3.16	0.63	-0.11
Principal Leadership	235	3.22	0.75	155	3.27	0.79	0.07
School Leadership	236	3.13	0.70	155	3.10	0.71	-0.04
Facilities and Resources	233	3.19	0.59	154	3.12	0.61	-0.12
Teacher Leadership	230	3.15	0.74	154	3.15	0.72	0.00
Professional Development	231	3.13	0.64	151	3.06	0.67	-0.11
Achievement Press	232	2.99	0.62	151	2.89	0.68	-0.15
Community Support and Engagement	226	3.17	0.55	151	3.11	0.64	-0.10
Student Conduct	232	3.14	0.68	151	3.04	0.66	-0.15
Collaboration	229	3.28	0.64	148	3.31	0.57	0.05
Data Use	229	3.10	0.75	141	2.97	0.80	-0.17
Attachment	230	3.16	0.49	151	3.14	0.48	-0.04
Hispanic (%)	237	54.4	-	158	48.1	-	-0.15
Black or African American (%)	237	7.2	-	158	7.6	-	0.04
White (%)	237	36.3	-	158	42.4	-	0.16
Other Race (%)	237	2.1	-	158	1.9	-	-0.06
Male (%)	237	18.6	-	158	21.5	-	0.11
Years of Experience	237	10.21	8.79	158	10.28	8.36	0.01
Bachelor’s Degree (%)	237	66.7	-	157	73.9	-	0.21
Post-Graduate Degree (%)	237	33.3	-	157	26.1	-	-0.21

Note. We present means and standard deviations for continuous variables and percentages for categorical variables. For standardized differences, we present Hedges’ *g* for continuous variables and Cox’s Index for categorical variables.

## **Program Effects**

### ***Analytic Approach***

To examine the effectiveness of CRRP in AISD, we conducted student-, teacher-, and school-level analyses.

### ***Student-Level Outcomes***

To examine student-level outcomes, we fit a series of multilevel models, taking into account that students are nested within schools. We regressed each outcome variable onto our indicator of treatment status (0 = comparison, 1 = treatment) included at the school level, the appropriate outcome variable measured at baseline (the 2018–19 school year), and baseline demographic variables. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion.

### ***Teacher-Level Outcomes***

To examine teacher-level outcomes, we fit a series of multilevel models, taking into account that teachers are nested within schools. We regressed each outcome variable onto our indicator of treatment status (0 = comparison, 1 = treatment) included at the school level, the appropriate outcome variable measured at baseline (the 2018–19 school year), and baseline demographic variables.

### ***School-Level Outcomes***

To examine school-level outcomes, we fit a series of regression models. We regressed each outcome variable onto our indicator of treatment status (0 = comparison, 1 = treatment). For models with teacher outcomes, we also included school demographic covariates. School-level demographics were unavailable for student outcomes in the 2021–22 school year; thus, they were not included. We estimated robust standard errors.

### ***Moderation Analyses***

To examine whether the effect of the intervention differed depending on student demographic characteristics, we fit a series of exploratory moderation models. For each student-level model examining outcomes in the 2021–22 school year, we added an interaction term to our model (i.e., treatment indicator x student characteristic). We looked at a range of student characteristics, including student gender, English learner status, special education status, economic disadvantage status, and race/ethnicity.

## Results

### Student-Level Outcomes

#### *Student-Perceived School Climate*

We found students who attended schools implementing CRRP perceived relationships with adults in their school more favorably than students in schools that did not implement CRRP ( $B = 0.07$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $95\% \text{ CI} = [0.01, 0.14]$ ) during the 2020–21 school year. We found no other differences in student-perceived school climate between students who attended a school implementing CRRP and those students who attended comparison schools in the 2020–21 school year (see Exhibit 9).

**Exhibit 9. Effect of CRRP on Student-Perceived School Climate in the 2020–21 School Year**

Outcome Measure	Estimate	SE	Standardized Difference	95% CI	<i>p</i> value
Personal Development Skills	0.03	0.04	0.02	[-0.06, 0.14]	0.47
Student Engagement	0.11 <sup>+</sup>	0.05	0.06	[-0.01, 0.23]	0.07
Behavioral Environment	0.04	0.03	0.03	[-0.03, 0.11]	0.31
Adult Relationships	0.07*	0.03	0.07	[0.01, 0.14]	0.03
Safety and Respect	0.01	0.03	0.01	[-0.05, 0.08]	0.66
Persistence	0.07	0.05	0.05	[-0.02, 0.16]	0.15

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g*. Covariates included baseline outcome measures, race/ethnicity, gender, limited English proficient status, economically disadvantaged status, special education status, and grade.

#### *Discipline*

We found no differences in the number of discipline incidents between students who attended a school implementing CRRP and those students who attended comparison schools in the 2021–22 school year (see Exhibit 10).

#### *Achievement*

We found no differences in student achievement between students who attended a school implementing CRRP and those students who attended comparison schools in the 2021–22 school year (see Exhibit 10).

#### *Attendance*

We found no differences in rates of attendance between students who attended a school implementing the CRRP and those students who attended comparison schools in the 2021–22 school year (see Exhibit 10).



### Exhibit 10. Effect of CRRP on Disciplinary Incidents, Attendance, and Achievement in the 2021–22 School Year

Outcome Measure	Estimate	SE	Standardized Difference	95% CI	<i>p</i> value
Disciplinary Incidents	-0.12	0.65	-0.01	[-0.64, 0.89]	0.85
Attendance Rate	-0.02	0.66	-0.00	[-1.32, 1.72]	0.97
Math Achievement	3.12	35.59	0.00	[-73.83, 81.30]	0.93
Reading Achievement	16.13	22.77	0.03	[-32.82, 67.27]	0.50

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g*. Covariates included baseline outcome measures, race/ethnicity, gender, limited English proficient status, economically disadvantaged status, special education status, and grade.

### Teacher-Level Outcomes

#### *Teacher-Perceived School Climate*

We found no differences in teacher perceptions of school climate between teachers who worked in a school implementing CRRP and teachers who worked in comparison schools in the 2020–21 school year (see Exhibit 11).

### Exhibit 11. Effect of CRRP on Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in the 2020–21 School Year

Outcome Measure	Estimate	SE	Standardized Difference	95% CI	<i>p</i> value
General Climate	-0.04	0.09	-0.04	[-0.22, 0.14]	0.62
Principal Leadership	-0.10	0.09	-0.08	[-0.28, 0.09]	0.30
School Leadership	-0.08	0.09	-0.07	[-0.25, 0.10]	0.37
Facilities and Resources	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	[-0.18, 0.07]	0.39
Teacher Leadership	-0.04	0.08	-0.04	[-0.21, 0.13]	0.60
Professional Development	-0.02	0.06	-0.02	[-0.14, 0.11]	0.77
Achievement Press	0.03	0.05	0.04	[-0.08, 0.14]	0.54
Community Support and Engagement	0.04	0.05	0.06	[-0.06, 0.15]	0.41
Student Conduct	0.04	0.07	0.05	[-0.09, 0.18]	0.54
Collaboration	0.00	0.06	0.00	[-0.11, 0.12]	0.97
Data Use	0.05	0.07	0.05	[-0.10, 0.20]	0.51
Attachment	-0.07	0.05	-0.10	[-0.16, 0.02]	0.10

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g*. Covariates included baseline outcome measures, race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience, and degree.

We did not fit a model using the district vision subscale due to missing data and convergence issues.

## School-Level Outcomes

### *Average School Proportions of Student-Perceived School Climate*

We found that in the first year of implementation (2020-21 school year), on average, more than 90% of students in CRRP schools agreed they felt safe in their school, that students at their school follow school rules, that students treat teachers with respect, that adults treat all students fairly, and that adults at their schools listen to student ideas and opinions (see Exhibit 9).

### **Exhibit 9. Average Proportion of Students who Agree Each Statement is True ‘A lot of the time’ or ‘Sometimes’ in Intervention Schools in the 2020-21 School Year.**

Outcome Measure	Estimate
I feel safe at my school.	92.2
It is easy for me to talk to adults at my school about my problems.	68.5
Students at my school follow the school rules.	92.1
Students at my school treat teachers with respect.	94.4
My classmates behave the way my teachers want them to.	89.7
Adults at my school treat all students fairly.	95.2
Adults at my school listen to student ideas and opinions.	93.1

*Note.* We present regression-adjusted average proportions.

We found that CRRP schools had higher proportions of students who thought it was easy to talk to adults about their problems ( $B = 6.34$ ,  $p = .02$ , 95% CI = [0.95, 11.73]) during the 2020–21 school year. We found no other differences in proportions of student-perceived school climate between schools where CRRP was implemented and schools without CRRP in the 2020–21 school year (see Exhibit 10).

**Exhibit 10. School-Level Effects of CRRP on Proportion of Students who Agree Each Statement is True ‘A lot of the time’ or ‘Sometimes’ in the 2020-21 School Year.**

Outcome Measure	Estimate	SE	Standardized Difference	95% CI	p value
I feel safe at my school.	2.01	2.80	0.25	[-3.48, 7.49]	0.47
It is easy for me to talk to adults at my school about my problems.	6.34	2.75	0.82	[0.95, 11.73]	0.02
Students at my school follow the school rules.	2.04	2.24	0.26	[-2.35, 6.43]	0.36
Students at my school treat teachers with respect.	2.83	2.19	0.42	[-1.46, 7.11]	0.20
My classmates behave the way my teachers want them to.	4.10	2.75	0.37	[-1.30, 9.50]	0.14
Adults at my school treat all students fairly.	1.97	1.87	0.35	[-1.70, 5.65]	0.29
Adults at my school listen to student ideas and opinions.	0.97	1.58	0.19	[-2.13, 4.06]	0.54

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges’ *g*. Covariates included school rates of race/ethnicity, gender, limited English proficient status, special education status, and economically disadvantaged status.

**Average School Proportions of Teacher-Perceived School Climate**

We found that in the first year of implementation (2020–21 school year), on average, more than 90% of teachers in CRRP schools agreed or strongly agreed that their school was a good place to work and learn, that their principal models social and emotional competence when dealing with students, that school discipline practices promote social and emotional learning, and that staff understand the policies and procedures about student conduct (see Exhibit 11).

**Exhibit 11. Average Proportion of Teachers who Agree or Strongly Agree Each Statement is True in Intervention Schools in the 2020–21 School Year.**

Outcome Measure	Estimate
Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.	92.5
All campus staff interact with one another in a way that models social and emotional competence.	84.6
My principal models social and emotional competence in the way that he/she deals with students and faculty on an everyday basis.	91.6
The school’s discipline practices promote social and emotional learning (e.g., developmentally appropriate consequences, restorative practice).	95.5
Staff clearly understand policies and procedures about student conduct.	92.6

*Note.* We present regression-adjusted average proportions.

We found that CRRP schools had lower proportions of teachers who thought their school was a good place to work and learn ( $B = -3.67$ ,  $p = .03$ , 95% CI = [-6.94, -0.40]) or that their principal models social and emotional competence with students ( $B = -3.29$ ,  $p = .04$ , 95% CI = [-6.40, -0.18]) during the 2020–21 school year. We found no other differences in proportions of teacher-perceived school climate between schools where CRRP was implemented and schools without CRRP in the 2020–21 school year (see Exhibit 12).

**Exhibit 12. School-Level Effects of CRRP on Proportion of Teachers who Agree or Strongly Agree with each of the below Statements in the 2020-2021 School Year.**

Outcome Measure	Estimate	SE	Standardized Difference	95% CI	<i>p</i> value
Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn.	-3.67	1.67	-0.78	[-6.94, -0.40]	0.03
All campus staff interact with one another in a way that models social and emotional competence.	-3.10	3.81	-0.31	[-10.57, 4.36]	0.42
My principal models social and emotional competence in the way that he/she deals with students and faculty on an everyday basis.	-3.29	1.59	-0.72	[-6.40, -0.18]	0.04
The school’s discipline practices promote social and emotional learning (e.g., developmentally appropriate consequences, restorative practice).	0.79	1.06	0.23	[-1.29, 2.87]	0.46
Staff clearly understand policies and procedures about student conduct.	-1.79	1.85	-0.31	[-5.42, 1.84]	0.33

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges’ *g*. Covariates included school rates of race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience, and degree.

### ***Student-Perceived School Climate***

We found no school-level differences in student-perceived school climate between schools implementing CRRP and comparison schools in the 2021–22 school year (see Exhibit 13).

#### **Exhibit 13. School-Level Effects of CRRP on Student Perceptions of School Climate in the 2021–22 School Year**

<b>Outcome Measure</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Standardized Difference</b>	<b>95% CI</b>	<b>p value</b>
Belonging	-4.33	6.40	-0.27	[-16.89, 8.22]	0.50
School Climate	-4.33	4.76	-0.35	[-13.67, 5.00]	0.36
Rigorous Expectations	-1.40	3.60	-0.16	[-8.46, 5.66]	0.70
Safety	-0.97	4.86	-0.08	[-10.48, 8.55]	0.84
Teacher-Student Relationships	-5.27	6.18	-0.34	[-17.37, 6.84]	0.39

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g*. No covariates were included due to lack of data for all schools in the 2021–22 school year.

### ***Teacher-Perceived School Climate***

We found no school-level differences in teacher-perceived school climate between schools implementing CRRP and comparison schools in the 2021–22 school year (see Exhibit 14).

#### **Exhibit 14. School-Level Effects of CRRP on Teacher Perceptions of School Climate in the 2021–22 School Year**

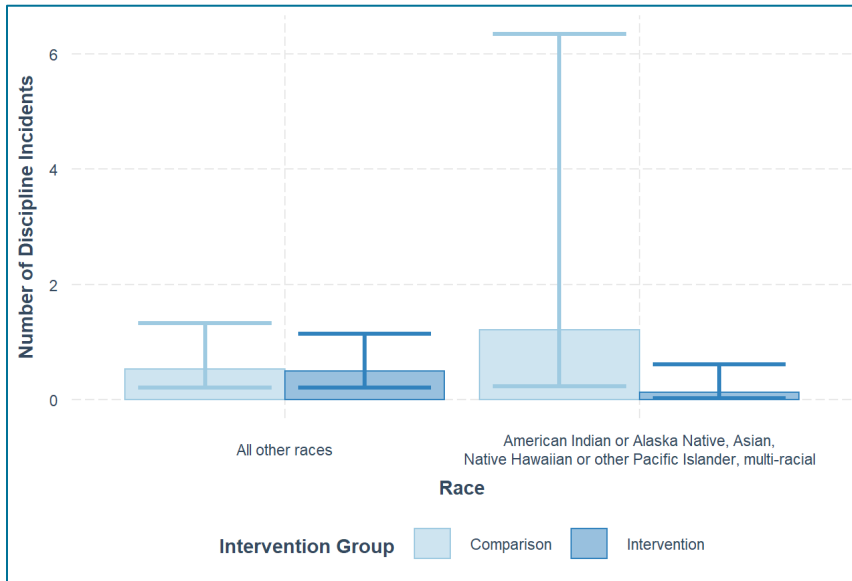
<b>Outcome Measure</b>	<b>Estimate</b>	<b>SE</b>	<b>Standardized Difference</b>	<b>95% CI</b>	<b>p value</b>
School Climate	-1.18	3.29	-0.11	[-7.62, 5.26]	0.72
Belonging	1.00	3.37	0.08	[-5.60, 7.60]	0.77
Cultural Awareness & Action	-1.52	4.61	-0.12	[-10.55, 7.50]	0.74
District Support	1.27	2.89	0.14	[-4.39, 6.93]	0.66
Feedback & Coaching	-3.47	4.44	-0.21	[-12.17, 5.22]	0.43
Professional Learning	-6.25	3.58	-0.49	[-13.27, 0.77]	0.08
School Leadership	0.06	4.82	0.00	[-9.39, 9.51]	0.99

*Note.* We present unstandardized coefficients, standard errors, *p* values, 95% confidence intervals, and standardized differences. For standardized differences, we present Hedges' *g*. Covariates included school rates of race/ethnicity, gender, years of experience, and degree.

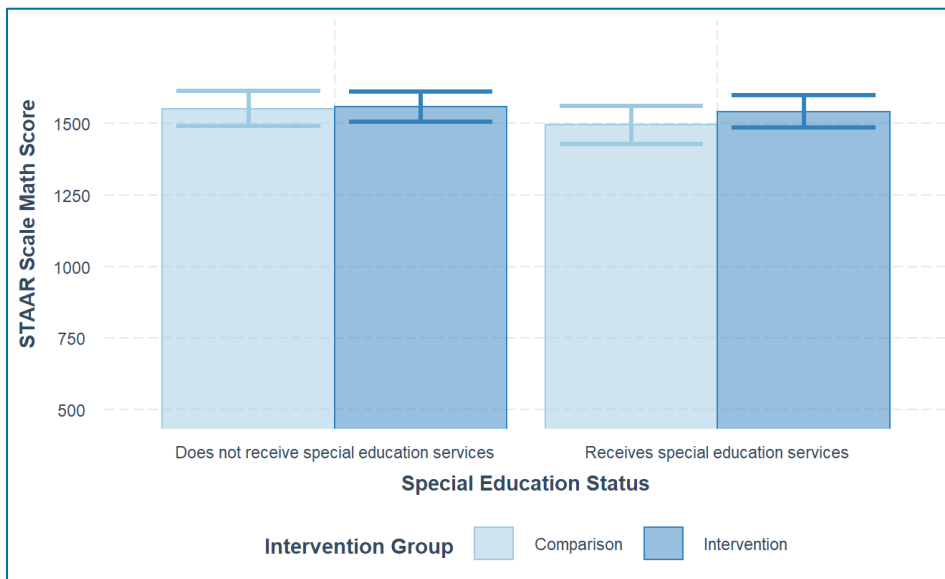
### Moderation Analyses

We found that students in schools implementing CRRP who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or multiracial had fewer disciplinary incidents than similar students in comparison schools ( $p = .03$ , see Exhibit 15). We found a trend showing that students in schools implementing CRRP who received special education services scored slightly higher on STAAR mathematics tests than similar students in comparison schools ( $p = .05$ , see Exhibit 16).

**Exhibit 15. Effects of CRRP on Discipline Incidents Among Students Who Identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or Multiracial**



**Exhibit 16. Effects of CRRP on STAAR Student Scale Mathematics Scores Among Students Who Receive Special Education Services**





## Qualitative Study

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### Study 2: Qualitative analysis of teachers and student in CRRP schools

#### *Introduction*

Given the numerous challenges surrounding pandemic-related disruptions to the original study design, AIR made a decision to conduct focus groups among elementary and middle school students and teachers at middle and elementary schools. In addition to COVID-19 issues, AISD also made several choices that weakened the original study design. Two surveys that AISD offered to teachers and students were replaced in the 2021–22 school year. Additionally, the dissolution of the research and evaluation group in the school district jeopardized the study team's access to quantitative data. The combination of these challenges led to uncertainty about what could be learned about the intervention from the quantitative study alone. Therefore, the study team proposed adding a qualitative component to the study that would collect perspectives of teachers and students in schools that had Implemented CRRP well according to CRRP associates and CRRP program leaders. The research design also presented an opportunity to capture and make use of voices of students and teachers, who are the primary intended beneficiaries of CRRP in AISD.

#### *Qualitative Data Collection and Methods*

The AIR study team conducted nine interviews (approximately 30 minutes each) with teachers and nine student focus groups (approximately 30 minutes each) across 4 elementary and 2 middle schools. The protocols for teacher interviews drew on evaluation questions in the implementation study and focused on understanding how restorative practices were used and the value teachers attributed to them. The protocol for students focused on developing an understanding of how well students understood the purpose of CRRP and their descriptions of circles, which are a primary feature of the CRRP program. Additionally, students were asked about whether they felt like their classrooms were safe spaces and the extent to which student felt teachers valued their cultures and life experiences. All student focus groups included an AISD teacher. One of the nine student focus groups was conducted in Spanish with an AISD translator repeating the protocol and any probing questions to students. This focus group was translated and transcribed. All other interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed to support analysis.

The qualitative findings were generated by implementing a rigorous qualitative coding process and content analysis. The methodological approach used was abductive analysis, which combines inductive and deductive theoretical frameworks that allow one to review existing literature and theory on the subject matter under investigation prior to conducting research,



while remaining open to unanticipated theory and findings during the analysis (Deterding & Waters 2018; Tavory & Timmermans 2014). An a priori coding structure (Stuckley 2015) was generated, based on the interview and focus group protocols. NVivo, a qualitative analytical program, was used to house data files and allowed for systematic and consistent coding and analysis. As new themes emerged from the data, the team made additions to the coding structure. Analysis of the codes elucidated the most salient themes and most frequently occurring patterns in the data, as well as diversions from the prominent themes within and across classrooms and school sites; reflecting the range of perspectives and experiences of teachers and student in CRRP environments. This method enabled rich descriptions and interpretations of the data to better understand the impact and lived the experiences of students and teachers in CRRP environments.

## **Student Focus Groups**

Our analysis of student focus groups generated three broad themes anchored in the protocols used to conduct the focus groups: Perceptions of circles, self expression and processing emotions, and valuing student culture and life experiences by teachers.

### ***Perceptions of Circles***

The study team asked about their experiences in circles. Circles here encompass all types of circles as we did not expect students understand differences between particular kinds of circles, such as community building or harm circles. Overall, students described circles as useful, enjoyable, and helpful. The CRRP circle space provided unique benefits to students related to individual self-expression, relationship building with teachers and peers, and exploring atypical topics.

Students described circles as (a) safe spaces both for students to talk about themselves, their individual lives, and their families and (b) environments in which they could discuss and process their emotions. Conversations in circles that focused on students sharing about themselves, may be related to events at school in general, experiences in other classes, or things that may be happening at home. In other instances, circles might be used as strategy for behavior de-escalation. Circles and specific talking pieces like the breathing ball and stuffed animals allowed students space to calm down, release stress, reset their emotions, and feel safe.

Many students viewed circles as spaces that were safe or non- judgmental allowing for both vulnerability and an environment in which nontraditional topics were discussed in school. The following exchange occurred in one focus group.

*Student: Like say somebody was feeling sad because your big brother hits you or something, in the circle, people don't laugh, they just sit and watch. And then when it's over, they say, "Oh, well, I'm sorry for you," and then it goes to the next person who has the talking piece.*

*And one time, the other third grade group was in here, was in our class and they did the circle, but they didn't really express their self...*

Teacher: *So they don't have the same openness that your class has?*

Student: *Yeah, they don't have the hearts that we have.*

Teacher: *Well, maybe they have to develop them.*

Student: *Well, probably we have to know them first.*

The preceding passage reveals several things. First, we're able to glean that the circle space forges bonds between students that allow for openness and empathy. The sharing student is discussing a conflict between themselves and their sibling—a topic that would otherwise not be shared with the larger classroom space. Although revealing this information could leave the student open to ridicule, their classmates choose to affirm them and express empathy for their situation. Second, we see that outside students that were visiting the class chose not to participate and/or were less open with the circle. Because these students might be considered new, they do not have the same level of trust and vulnerability as the regular classroom students, as this has to be developed over time. Additionally, this passage also points to the limits of circles. The third-grade visitors were from the same school, and yet the student recounting this incident seem to place them outside the trust develop within the class circle they visited.

Students largely understood the purpose of restorative practices to be related to their social and emotional benefit. Although students were not able to articulate a more formal definition of CRRP, they associated circles with helping them process emotions and find emotional balance, assisting in building connections to other students and forging friendships and aiding with problem solving.

Student understanding of the uses of circles were generally related to emotional expression, learning from and about other students, generating deeper connections, solving problems, and resolving conflicts. In addition to these social-emotional applications, circles were also used for lesson plan/content delivery, eliciting feedback, and collectively generating class rules and norms. Managing conflict was also identified as a use of circles, but based on comments from students, circles were found to be used more proactively rather than reactively.

### **Circles as place for expression, processing emotions, and connecting to others, but not a place to resolve conflict**

Students in focus groups reported that circles gave them a space to process their emotions, particularly negative emotions associated with stress or difficult. Moreover, students felt sufficiently safe in their classrooms to express their emotions. In this respect, because students

felt safe they were able to express their emotions. For students in the focus groups, however, circles were not seen as conflict resolution tools by students.

Interviewer: *So when [your teacher] does your circle, the teacher led circles, do you think that's a good use of your time at school?*

Student A: *Yes, it's a wonderful time. It's like me telling people how I feel and why I feel that way. And then they sit there and listen.*

Student B: *I agree with [Student A] because it's really... Its only... It's like a special time to share your feelings and express them...And express yourself to new people that are in your classroom, so they know more about you so they can become your friends.*

Interviewer: *So what were some of the ways that circles were used?*

Student 1: *So that we can know each other. Something that we did is share names and what kind of stuff that we like, or where are you from?*

Student 2: *Okay. So, basically how we did circle at the beginning of the year and we still do, so the teacher had this globe and we passed it around and we introduced ourselves and we told little things about us. And now when we do them every day, [our teacher] gave us some flashcards and they have questions on them and then every time there's a question we pass around the globe and they answer the question, like let's say, what would you do with a million dollars? And then you pass the globe and then they'll answer.*

Student 1: *I like using the breathing ball and Sid the sloth, because well, for the breathing ball it's because you could take deep breaths. And with Sid the sloth, you feel like... You feel... Because sometimes when I hold the Sid the sloth, I feel safe.*

Student 2: *I like the breathing ball and Sid the slot because when you're breathing, you get to calm down from a rough day. And with Sid, you get to express yourself to new people.*

Interviewer: *Has participating in teacher-led circles helped you or other students in any other way?*

Student: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *How so?*

Student: *When I'm feeling stressed and I'm having a bad day.*

Translator: *Sometimes breathing helps them in the morning because they've gone through the death of their grandmother, or the death of their cat and it helps them process with the breathing.*

### **Valuing Students' Culture and Life Experiences**

Another aspect of the CRRP program focused on encouraging teachers to express value for student's cultures and experiences outside of school. Among students who responded to a question about whether teachers valued their cultures or life experiences, most reported that teachers made them feel like their culture or life experiences were valued. There were only

three instances in which students disagreed with the statement/question and in those circumstances, the answers were not elaborated upon. Teacher care about students' background and experiences were expressed in several ways: (a) through intentional conversations about students and their home lives, (b) by using books and other instructional materials that reflect and affirm student identities and (c) by assigning student projects that incorporated their cultures.

*Student: When I enter the school, after the weekend and when it's a Monday, they said, "Hey, how was your weekend?" I said, "Yeah, it's good. I went there. I had fun. We went to that place. We ate."*

*Student 1: Okay. The first one is Ms. B, so if someone in our family passes away, she gives us a hug or she says, "Oh, I'm so sorry that happened." Like when-*

*Student 1: When my mom's grandma died, well, no, not her, but my mom's grandpa, when he died, Ms. B, she said, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry that happened."*

*Student 2: She actually cares about our family.*

*Student: Both of my brothers came here, but my brother's still here, so everybody knows me.*

*Interviewer: Oh, so you're a legacy?*

*Student: Yeah.*

*Interviewer: So a teacher will say like, "Oh, I had your brother, and I know what's going on, and I know you're one of the younger ones." So it makes you feel like you're connected. Okay, yeah.*

*Interviewer: So the last circle that you guys were in, what did you talk about?*

*Student 1: School.*

*Student 2: Yeah.*

*Student 1: And sports.*

*Interviewer: So what about school?*

*Student 2: Grades, how well you're doing in school, do you like your teachers or not, your friends, your family members.*

*No, really, we just talk about things, like what's going on at home, sometimes what we did on spring breaks, winter break and stuff, what we did on the weekend.*

### **Teacher Interviews**

The findings from teacher interviews fell into four broad categories: (a) navigating differences in classrooms; (b) awareness of and altering power dynamics in classrooms; (c) managing conflict, discipline, and behavior; and (d) safety and belonging in their classrooms.

## Navigating Differences—Changing How Students Understand Difference

One theme emerging from teacher interviews were teacher-initiated changes to the way that students understood and navigated difference. This seemed to be the result of (a) students getting to know one another on a more familiar level because of their time in proactive community building circles and (b) intentional efforts on the part of instructors to challenge students to use non-pejorative terms to characterize those different from themselves.

Interview data revealed that teachers employed two primary strategies to help students work through issues of difference. The first strategy focused on changing the way that individual differences were spoken about in classrooms.

*It's harder, I think for the students to realize that people are different than them. And so they argue, or ... kids sometimes ... picking on or ... bullying. And they're like, "That person's different. And so that's weird," and that's how the kids deal with weird. But I've seen a big improvement from when I started 11 years ago to now. One, because the kids just with having language to describe it and be like, "Okay, weird is not the word we're going with." And they're like, "But they're weird." And you're like, "No, weird is not the word. We can describe it as," this or this, and understanding. And at least, I feel like the culturally responsive practices gives us, it's in their mind, even if it's not their first thought that people are different, at least you can be like, "You don't remember when we talked about how everyone's not different?" And the kid's like, "Oh. Yeah. Right. And so I can treat people better."*

In the passage above we see that this teacher uses instances in which students refer to one another as weird, as a teachable moment and an opportunity for students to think more deeply about what they mean when highlighting differences. A central feature of CRRP is encouraging teachers and students to move away from deficit or negative labels toward labeling that is neutral or asset framing. Another teacher highlighted taking a similar approach with students in order to create a more welcoming space for immigrant students.

*We have a lot of refugees from other countries. I teach world cultures, and so one of my big things in the classroom is when they are tempted to say, well, that's weird about another culture, we now say that's different. That is something that has been sort of driven into the sixth graders this year. It's nice to see them respond to each other without me having to prompt them now. When they go that's weird, and have some go it's not weird. It's just different.*

Being careful about separating students, and their characterizations, from their actions was also leveraged by teachers to building in acceptance and understanding. In the excerpt below students and their teachers are discussing the actions of one of their classmates who was caught stealing in school.

Student 1: *The teachers can't deal with him, he's so bad.*

Student 2: *He's really bad.*

Student 3: *He's the baddest boy in the second grade.*

CRRP Teacher: *So I want to correct your language. Are people bad-*

Student 1: *make bad choices.*

CRRP Teacher: *... or do people make bad choices?*

Student 3: *The make bad choices.*

CRRP Teacher: *Okay. Everybody is good inside, even if they make bad choices.*

Student 3: *Yeah, in their heart, they're good.*

A second strategy for assisting students with navigating difference lie in tapping into students' sense of empathy and drawing correlations to identities or groups that might be othered and themselves.

*One of the things that we are still working on is the gay and transgendered acceptance, or maybe not even acceptance understanding. A lot of our students come from very religious, very conservative backgrounds in other countries where gay people are hidden away. During pride week, there was a lot of, well, why are we even doing this? Why is this something that should be celebrated? In my classes, particularly, again, with culture, we went back to, well, gay people are represented across the spectrum in every culture for all time. No one wants to be ridiculed for who they are, and who they can't change. A lot of our students who were struggling with it, we tried to tap into the empathy of you're from Honduras. How would you like it if someone said that, well, you're not worth it because you're from Honduras. Well, that would make me mad. Exactly. Would you want someone to say that to you? No. Well, then why would you say something like that to someone else?*

### **Awareness of and Altering Power Dynamics in Classrooms**

Restorative practices promoted a perspective that places students and educators on equal ground regarding offerings of respect, ownership of the space in classroom and knowledge co-creation. A restorative framework challenges teachers to see their pupils as other humans that they can teach, grow with, and learn from, and thereby deserve respect, empathy, and compassion as other humans. In the passage below one teacher described how the CRRP approach was different from what teachers are used to.



*It's not that there's never conflict between teachers and students. But I think restorative practices has given our staff a common language to use. Those core beliefs about human beings, those apply to little people. And I've been at campuses before where those beliefs are not extended to tiny humans and that it's more of an authoritarian, "You listen to me and you do what I say, and I'm here to teach you." Right. And that's not what restorative practices is. And it's much more about, "Hey, we co-create knowledge together. We listen to each other, we share ideas." So I think it has helped give language to teachers of how to do that.*

A large part of CRRP involves relationship building and getting to know students as individuals and humans.

*I think I've gotten to know the students that come here more often as human and not just students. And I think that's really important. They tell me about their family. They'll even tell me, "I'm not comfortable talking about that," which I think, that's a hard skill. And so that makes me feel like, "Okay, they do feel safe. They can say, 'Whoa, you're pushing too much,' instead of just saying silent or whatever."*

One noted strategy for building strong student teacher relationships was co-creating respect agreements as a class, and delivering lessons in circles. One teacher observed that using circles in these two ways helped students to have shared ownership of the rules of their space, created a bond between them and allowed shy or quieter students to participate when they might not have otherwise.

*Ms. M even came to my classroom and we did the respect agreements together for the first time. She helped me out with splitting students in different circles and working on their respect agreements on their own. And then we would get a list from each group and put it on the TV, make a document. And it's there, I just modify in the future what we have to. All that. There was also a couple of homeroom lessons with circles. I think somehow it does create like a bond among them. The ones that never speak, because some kids will not speak if you don't literally give them the chance to do it, kind of force them. I'm one of those. It makes a difference for them, and some of them are really smart and don't say anything because they're shy.*

Part of the work of creating a safe and supportive environment is shifting teachers' definitions of respect and being attuned to how different cultural backgrounds inform how students behave and respond.

*You always say, "They know better," but it's like, well, with cultural responsiveness-. I'm like, "Maybe they don't know better, and maybe that's not better in their culture." And so understanding that we have to kind of teach kids what our school community norms are, but also allow their community norms to influence what we're doing. Right?*

Modeling restorative behavior in ways that are read as authentic, by students, goes a long way in building trust and creating student buy-in. In the example below one teacher described the

importance of apologizing and admitting fault to students when a wrongdoing has cooccurred. Being vulnerable with students in this way, can build empathy and relatability. It also enforces the idea that teachers are accountable to students in the same ways that students are accountable to teachers.

*One of the most important things to be able to do as a teacher, and when I mentor teachers I tell them this, I tell myself this, "It's okay to apologize." I've done it twice this week, because that's huge for a kid who has been told so much, "Because I said so," "Because I'm an adult." And for me to say, "I slept on this and my reaction may have been over the top. I apologize, I'm not following this through with the next discipline stuff, but let's have a conversation now that we both feel better." So I do think that's the number one thing every teacher can do. And model that thinking, absolutely model assessing your emotions, refining your emotions and deciding how you're going to let your emotions affect your behavior. And showing them there is a process, that adults can make mistakes, and that it's okay to make a mistake and come back from it.*

Strategic use of body language emerged as one way to productively manage student conflict in their classroom.

*The way I handle issues is we have a conversation, and it's a very like, I get to their level, so usually I'm sitting and not standing, and we have a conversation. We talk about why we made the choice? What the choice was? Did you need to make that choice? And it's very much like I put the responsibility in their hands, and I think I can't talk for other teachers because I really don't know what they do, but a lot of it is sending kids to the office.*

### **Navigating Conflict, Discipline and Behavior in Classrooms**

Interviews suggested that the handling of disciplinary incidents varied from classroom to classroom because teachers were more autonomous in deciding what to do about classroom disruptions. One of the most frequently noted benefits of the CRRP framework, reported by teachers was improvements to classroom climate. In interviews, teachers noted that their individual classroom spaces were generally more manageable and had fewer instances of disciplinary referrals and fewer interpersonal conflicts between students. Most teachers indicated that their CRRP practices were not a whole school approach and that other students may still be subjected to punitive discipline in their schools.

One teacher remarked that previously her students were considered troubled students and were labeled the “bad kids” by others in the school building. However, because she had a relationship with these students and used individualized strategies to work through conflict, she experienced much fewer behavioral problems. Though behavior issues were not entirely absent from this classroom space, they did not occur as frequently as they had in the past. As a result, the teacher advocated for CRRP being applied to the whole campus.



*I've noticed a big change in my class and, I mean, I was told when I got here that my classes had a lot of struggles and had a lot of teachers leave and walk out on them and that they were "the bad class." And that made me feel really sad that that was the reputation...And even now, I can't even imagine or even see them being like that just because the relationships that we built in here, and of course we have our days, we have behavior problems, but I have ways that we handle them, and I handle different behaviors in very different ways, depending on the student. And just because I know them so well and how they'll respond to a reaction from me. And I think it's something that, as a campus, we really need to come together and really talk about it because there are struggles, and I think that they could change if we came together and really had a conversation about implementing these strategies and ideas into the whole campus.*

One explanation for the decline in behavioral issues/interruptions was better peer relationships between students. When circles were used proactively, they allowed for the building of bonds between students. Another teacher noted their surprise that more conflict hasn't happened. Their belief was that using a restorative framework has made the class community more cohesive.

*Usually around this time of the year in third grade, that's when they really start to form groups and they start to notice each other. They're not all just one class. They form social groups, which is normal. But that leads to a lot of interpersonal conflict. I will say that this year, I have not seen that. I mean of course I've seen a little bit, but not to the level that usually because, I think there's such a strong classroom culture, and we've had some really deep conversations. So a lot of them have had to be vulnerable with each other. So I think that you can't help, but see somebody in a different light and have a level of respect when you have had these conversations with each other which has been super cool to see.*

Teachers emphasized that they were striving to create spaces in which students felt safe and could be their authentic selves and wanted to empower students to be more autonomous. In most cases this entailed helping students to develop better interpersonal skills and encouraging them to use those skills independently to navigate conflict. Several teachers accentuated that circles gave students the socio emotional skills and tools to self-regulate and solve their own problems. If the issue that arose was small, teachers might encourage students to develop a solution on their own.

*In my classroom, if there's something that arises, whether let's say, it's two students and it's something minor, I will step back and see how they negotiate, see what they come to. They mostly have the language to do this and the practice to do this. I'll see how that goes. If there's still friction, then I might jump in. Or if they come to me, I will tell them, "Hey, how can you work it out first?" "Because I'm not always going to be around to solve things for you or with you." And so that's worked out really well. But if it gets elevated or escalated, then I'll have to jump in.*

Shared strategies for navigating conflict included working proactively by doing things such as greeting students, doing daily check ins, holding community building circles, co-creating respect agreements and class norms, and establishing a strong classroom culture of acceptance and belonging. Reactive approaches included offering conflict circles, using affective questions, and statements, holding breathing exercises, and having designated peace areas in the classroom where students could calm down and process their emotions. Conflict circles might be used for a myriad of things including verbal disagreements, bullying, and physical altercations. In each of these instances, getting to the root of the problematic behavior was emphasized as well as generating ways to repair harm. One teacher explains why they believe CRRP is a more effective approach to dealing with disruptive behavior.

*The more conversations you have with the kids, the more comfortable they're going to feel with you, the less they're going to want to throw on an eraser across the room because they know that that disappointed her, and everybody saw me do that and saw me get in trouble. So maybe next time I won't throw on an eraser across the room, but there are a lot of teachers that do send kids to the office when something happens. And in a way, the kids are like, "Fine, I'll be back in five minutes...And it doesn't really do anything for the root cause of what's going on because you need to ask the why."*

All teachers noted preferring to handle issues “in house” or within their classrooms as opposed to relying on zero tolerance policies such as detention, suspension, or expulsion. Sending students to the office was often categorized as a last resort or an option only when there were issues of physical safety.

### **Safety and Belonging in Classrooms**

To facilitate student bonds many teachers emphasized being intentional about creating space where students felt safe and comfortable being their authentic selves. A large part of this work was also about giving students a sense of autonomy and equipping them with the social-emotional language and skills to assist them with navigating conflict and difference. Providing students with the tools to express themselves, work through their emotions, and come to solutions using open communication were thought to be conducive to both student development and community development.

Teacher interviews suggested that creating bonds or a sense of community between students did not always translate into all students being friends. Cliques and friendship group clusters still existed in the restorative space, as did conflict between students. However, even when students were not friends, they were able to demonstrate support, clear communication, and mutual respect for one another.

## Strategies to Promote Safety and Belonging

The most commonly reported method for cultivating student sense of safety and belonging was the windows and mirrors approach. That is, within a classroom environments (particularly the wall art), students should be able to see and learn about the world around them as well as seeing themselves and their place in that world. In some instances, the signage was a direct reflection of the student identities in the classroom such as pictures of people from diverse cultures, flags from different countries to represent a myriad of ethnicities or ancestries, quotes and pictures of famous authors, intellectuals, and scientists from diverse backgrounds. In other circumstances the walls might be filled with the art and works of the students themselves. Both strategies were employed to give students a sense of comfort, belonging, and ownership in the space.

*I feel like with our students, we do a very good job of making sure that we're reflecting our school of the students we have in our classrooms. And then making sure that those cultures are just reflected and not only are they reflected, they are seen within every aspect of the school.*

Another teacher notes.

*I usually have their work. It's displayed at the very front of the room. I like to have their stuff up a lot because then they really see themselves in their classroom because I want it to be our classroom. I don't want it to be my classroom because they're in here the same amount ... Like I know so it's their room too. I want them to feel safe at home, comfortable, and I want them to see themselves on the walls and in this room.*

In addition to creating visible cues that promoted inclusion, teachers also talked about using instructional materials that reflect diverse student background and non-dominant narratives. In rarer circumstances, educators discussed reviewing the curriculum for biased material and trying to make it more culturally responsive. In either case, teachers who did this often emphasized the importance of their students seeing themselves reflected in literature and classroom material.

*Anything that's posted up in my classroom is a reflection of them or themselves, or any book that I read. I make sure that they're all type of characters. It's not just the typical token. Like it's not a typical token. Like that's... I don't do that. And I make sure that my team also knows that's not acceptable. And so just knowing that they are reflected in their scene, they also are able to use their own voices within the classroom.*

Actions like changing the school calendar to be reflective of more diverse religious and cultural holidays as well as identity months worked to accomplish a similar aim. Lesson plans and assignments that allowed students to share about their culture and backgrounds were leveraged both to create an enhanced sense of inclusion and to amplify student voice. In the passage below one teacher elaborates on how they accomplish this end.

*The way I deliver my instruction, I'm trying to include those cultural backgrounds. Those like stories, for example, if we know I have three students from Guatemala, they know these things happen in Guatemala, well I'll discuss it. And I also include myself. I'm not from Central America, but I will talk about my own native country and say, "Hey," for example, "Where I'm from, this is what we do. This is what we eat." So I think, for example, when we do our journaling, when I try to help them with sentences, I make sure their voices are heard. "What do you want to write about? On Sunday, it was Julissa's birthday. How did Julissa and her family celebrate her 6th birthday?" Then we write about it. "Let's draw us Julissa. It was her birthday."...Well on Monday, because on Sunday, there's no school, so we try, in that way, we reflect the culture of the classroom and the school by really including their experiences and their backgrounds. "We know that Aman loves to play with his toy soldier, so if we're going to write about Aman, let's include that." I think that's the way we're trying to reflect the culture and who they are.*

Working to treat students equitably also helped to create a welcoming environment of safety and belonging. In one interview a teacher noted that recent Afghan student refugees who identified as Muslim were encouraged to go to the library to pray so they would still be in accordance with their religious practices that mandated that they pray five times a day.

In addition to the windows and mirrors approach, doing student check ins, creating a strong school culture, modeling respectful collegial relationships, and building connections with student families were other mentioned strategies to enhancing student safety and belonging.

Establishing a strong school culture and making that culture inclusive of the identities of the student body was one campus approach to creating student belonging. In this particular school requiring students to wear a formal uniform, having a school creed, a community clap, and different houses were traditions that worked together to generate cohesion and sense of unity. At the same time student differences were also valued as evidenced by a variety of national flags that connected to student ethnicity and culture.

*We have some pretty strong traditions on this campus. We require them to wear a button up and a tie. We have a tie ceremony when a new student comes in from a campus that doesn't wear ties, which is most of them. The boys are pretty quick to say this is how you tie a tie, just helping each other look sharp because I think that the outsides match the insides, so you can tell a student who's having a rough day. They're always a sharp dresser and their tie is askew and they're not tucked in, you can tell immediately what's going on. I think that's a big one. But the students are just really involved in the traditions. They know the creed. They know the community clap. They know the house meetings. The teachers build that up with the kids in their classrooms and stuff... I don't really know how to describe it, except I feel like that culture does sort of run through the entire campus. In the atrium, we have the flags of all the countries that are represented here. We have kids from Iraq and Afghanistan and Honduras. When they go out, they know that they're welcome here*

*because they see their country's flag. We have kids who speak 15 different languages, and we use Google Translate when we can.*

Building connections with individual families and inviting family and community input on larger school decisions were also identified as ways to promote belonging. To create connections with families a teacher might give them their cell phone number or provide a number of mediums (email, texting, apps) to get in contact, to keep the lines of communication open. To create more meso-level engagement teachers discussed having parent groups and panels to weigh in about decisions that affected their students.

*We've had lots of parent panels, we've done one of all Black parents to hear what is their perspective of our community, what do they think that we can do better from a racial lens? We've done an LGBTQ parent panel from parents that identify in that way and how do they think that our school's safe or inclusive, or what ways we can grow in that. Our PTA is super robust and is involved in a lot of decision making in our CAC community. So yeah, I feel like Becker does a really good job of bringing the community in actually as stakeholders and decision makers, and then asking for feedback too, like, "Hey, this was this event. Let's talk about it from these lenses. How did it go and what can we do differently?" And then acting on actually making those changes that are recommended, which is a big deal. Not just open to feedback, but actually take it and be reflective and make changes.*

### **Evidence of Safety and Belonging**

One measure of increased sense of safety and belonging identified by teachers was increased socialization or integration between students as a classroom unit and other students in CRRP classes. One teacher initially noticed this when observing students during recess.

*I would say at least with third grade this year, I have noticed just even on the playgrounds, the classes like mix, and they like to play with each other and they get along, and I think that's really cool just because I will say sometimes there's just a bit of a separation with the bilingual classes and the ESL class.*

The deepening of student-teacher relationships was another indication that students felt safe and connected in the school environment. Increased trust between students and teachers might manifest itself in several ways. In one interview a teacher shared that students voluntarily came to the library to eat lunch instead of the cafeteria because that is where their circles were held and where they, presumably felt connected and a sense of community. While it's not typical for students to eat lunch in the library, they advocated for the right to be in this space during lunch. Student willingness to reach out to teachers regarding problems or concerns that they had was also believed to be an indication that students felt a sense of belonging.

*I have kids, they'll come and talk to me about a variety of things in their life, sometimes it's little, sometimes it's big. But I have that rapport with them, I have that trust with them. And I know that they feel safe at school. And like I said, it feels very much like a family between staff and the students. It's a fairly small campus, not tiny.*

## Discussion

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Through intensive coaching and onsite support of culturally responsive and restorative practices, AISD sought to improve relationships between students and teachers in an effort to improve attendance, improve academic achievement and lower discipline referrals, with particular emphasis on the district's Black and Brown student populations. Our findings suggest that even through the COVID-19 pandemic, CRRP was reasonably well-implemented in the 10 project schools. AISD's CRRP program did have a positive effect on student/teacher relationships. We did not find any statically significant effect on attendance or academic performance. Students identified as Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander or multiracial in CRRP schools had fewer disciplinary incidents and students who received special education services scored slightly higher on the STARR mathematics tests. Interviews with teachers and focus groups with students in CRRP schools generally confirmed the improvement in student teacher relationships, and improvements in classroom climates.

RPs within the context of CRRP differs from the restorative justice initiatives in other districts in that CRRP is viewed as being essential to education as a profession where educators work with students whose lives have been deeply impacted by social conditions and problems outside of the school setting. That students in intervention schools were different only on the basis of relationships with adults points to some of the structural deficiencies of AISD's implementation and the context within which it occurred. It might be that the Tier 1 structures our implementation study noted CRRP associates were successfully developing were too nascent to weather the onslaught of the social disruptions caused by the pandemic. On the other hand, the literature on restorative practices suggests the practices would better prepare communities for dealing with adverse situations. Put another way, the resources of the CRRP program did not appear to inoculate or support CRRP schools better than their peers during the pandemic.

AISD embarked on the CRRP program hoping to address historically persistent discipline and academic achievement inequalities of Black and Brown students and the positive improvement in disciplinary incidents for a sub-set of students is hard to account for. We know that the pandemic greatly affected schools across the country, and discipline practices during the pandemic were different from those pre-pandemic. Considering the changed context, improvements by one sub-group are potentially an artifact of a system in flux. On the other hand, the consistent evidence that relationships between students and teachers improved in CRRP schools seems to point to the emergence of a solid social foundation that would, across the board, support fewer disciplinary incidents. How students and teachers take advantage of

these improved conditions in classrooms to advance academic achievement was beyond the design of both CRRP and this study but is worth exploring.

It is the very rare innovative education design that is well align with the context it encounters. As with many other education interventions underway when the pandemic began, disruptions to schooling and assessments greatly affected our ability to use instrumentations previously used to gauge differences. It is thus not surprising that attendance and academic performance of students in CRRP schools exhibited no difference from their peers.



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