

The National Coalition Building Institute

Creating System Change to Reduce Disparities in Discipline

By Cherie Brown and Joyce Shabazz



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Introduction

In 2009 the Antioch School District was sued by the ACLU of Northern California for racial disparities in discipline. Leadership training by the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) was built into the remedy in the final settlement agreement between the ACLU and Antioch School District. For the past five years NCBI has partnered with the School District to implement a system wide comprehensive initiative working with the school board, administrators, teachers, parents, staff and students to change school climate and thereby reducing racial disparities in discipline.

About NCBI

Since 1984 the National Coalition Building Institute, a non-profit organization, headquartered in Washington DC has specialized in cultural competence, equity & inclusion and anti-bullying programs in schools, universities, law enforcement, and communities across the United States. NCBI was designated a best practice by the US Department Education for its work on race and gender in schools. NCBI was one of five organizations to receive this national designation.

In this article NCBI describes the best practices and skill sets applied to successfully reduce disparities in the Antioch School District over a five year period.

Components of the Program

Build a Strong In House Leadership Team

One of the best practices of NCBI is to first train a leadership team within each school system. Fifteen selected administrators and teachers representing four high schools in the Antioch School District attended an NCBI five day Leadership for Diversity Institute, held in Washington DC, to be introduced to all of the skills, principles and practices that would be institutionalized in their district.

Create System Wide Buy In

Eight NCBI senior leaders in partnership with the newly trained in house leadership team from Antioch delivered a one day program throughout the District. The goal of the day was to introduce the new in-house leadership team to the district and gain buy in from every administrator throughout the district for the skills and practices that would be institutionalized in their schools and classrooms. There were eight simultaneous day long sessions with participation from 400 hundred teachers, administrators and staff.

Train Students to Lead the Way

Students must be involved in every step of the change process. In a research study in 2010, the University of Montana evaluated NCBI youth led programs and concluded that, when students led the anti-bullying work in their schools, violence was reduced by 50%. Teacher led anti-bullying programs did not have the same results. Over the 5 years of the settlement agreement, NCBI led eight Train the Trainer programs for 450 high school students from 5 different high schools. The students trained represented different neighborhoods with diverse identities, cultures, languages, and economic backgrounds. NCBI trained the students to replicate diversity and inclusion workshops for all the high schools and middle schools across the district. The student lead sessions had a profound impact on both the students leading the workshops as well as the students attending the sessions. The introduction of a core skill set enabled diversity to become a central part of the classroom curriculum.

Include Parents for Full Impact

To insure that the climate change work in the schools was also being implemented at home, NCBI led a series of parent workshops, where the parents could learn the same skills sets being taught in the schools to the teachers, students, and administrators.

Work with Primary Disciplinarian's to Institute Change

After working on school climate change for two years, NCBI took the next step in changing discipline practices as mandated by the ACLU agreement. NCBI convened a series of leadership workshops for all of the administrators who had primary responsibility for discipline. NCBI demonstrated how the initial experiences with discipline in their own homes of origin influenced their current discipline practices as administrators. NCBI worked with them on identifying and then reducing unaware biases, specifically targeting Black and Latino students. We taught skills on how to handle oppressive comments and behaviors from students in a way that could defuse the behavior without having to resort to suspensions or expulsions.

Seven Best Practices for Implementing a Successful Program to Eliminate Disparities in Discipline

- a) There needs to be a system wide commitment to strong climate/cultural change throughout the system.
- b) Solutions cannot be short term fixes. The ACLU settlement agreement was for five years, understanding that it would require that much time to begin to institutionalize changes.
- c) There has to be buy in at all levels. The school board was involved in every step of the partnership between NCBI and the Antioch Schools. Early on, the NCBI high school student leadership team led a workshop for the School Board to introduce them to all of the skill sets being institutionalized throughout the District.

d) The project requires one person to be designated as a primary coordinator for the program system wide. This role cannot just be an add on to a current job. Giving one person the time and support to coordinate the program and to be able to advocate for the programs ongoing centrality in the system is critical.

e) Ongoing work must be done to insure consistent follow through by all administrators. Several principals were aware of the ACLU agreement but did not create the time in their school schedule for the NCBI programs to be implemented with all of their teachers, staff and students. To resolve this, NCBI led a district wide session for all of the principals with two objectives: to increase their commitment to providing the time needed for the NCBI student trained leaders to lead programs in their school; and to train them in the advanced skills necessary for all of their daily work on discipline issues.

f) Specific attention must be given to the issue of Race and its impact on all students, staff and administrators. NCBI offered additional resource and support to a key Black teacher in the District so he could be a primary leader and advocate for the NCBI program. He attended a weekend leadership development retreat for Black leaders to focus on the impact of racism and to deepen relationships.

g) Ensure that there is an annual budget for the project with sufficient allocations each year to sustain the work.

Tangible Outcomes

Below are a set of comments from several of the teachers and administrators on the In House Leadership Team about the impact of the program.

"I began to understand that my calling was to institute change and to facilitate improvements in the Antioch Unified School District. It's amazing how the students embraced the changes that they needed to make within themselves. The students took the NCBI program and just ran with it; they were hungry for more." *Bernard*

"I had a student who was falling asleep in class. In the past I would have just said 'why are you sleeping?', without providing him with any opportunity to talk out what was going on. And he would have just said 'because I'm tired'. But this time, I used an NCBI communication skill to break through; we had a conversation and he really talked to me. Since then he has not fallen asleep in class; he is proud to tell me he stayed awake in all of my classes and he's now communicating with me how successful he can be.

"The biggest benefit I see from NCBI is the growth of the student trainers. We've probably had 2,000 kids go through our trainings and we've had 40 kids that have gone through the 2 day Train the Trainer at Deer Valley High School. It's a pretty diverse group; many of the students were not high achievers academically, but they now have confidence in their presenting abilities. Jose told us he now wants to be a teacher. He just loves presenting in front of kids." *Brian*

“Many of our students are not very connected to school; most of them protect themselves by the walls they put up. After the beginning of NCBI two years ago, we started having student led workshops and the effects were immediate as the kids began to find ways of opening up to each other and finding commonality. We had much less conflict. Earlier this year our principal passed away. I think we had a dozen kids came to the funeral and afterwards I noticed that every single one of them had been through NCBI. I think that was a big reason for their showing up.” *Mark*

“NCBI has helped me as a teacher to be patient, to listen. I now help my students realize that I’m here for them, I’m an advocate for them, that they can talk to me at any time about anything. Dealing with student athletes, NCBI has taught me how to ask questions, how to sit there and be an active listener, how to let them have their voice, and know that somebody is there for them when they feel that nobody is there.” *Amy*

“As adults I think we have so many barriers. There was a student who talked about how she was undocumented; there was another student who had been abandoned. Just hearing those stories resonated with me. It was a reality check; so many students come to school every day with a huge weight on their shoulders.” *Violeta*

“NCBI has helped me to become a better listener. I ran into a student who was at the “Train the Trainer” and she said, ‘You know after listening to your story it made me realize that teachers have problems too. I never really saw my teachers as people. I just thought they were up there telling us to do this and to do that; it never really occurred to me that you have problems too.’” *Jennifer*

In NCBI training I witnessed one student talk about the abuse she suffered; her dad was a drug dealer. She was placed in a group home in Concord and when I went to see her she ran to me and gave me the biggest, biggest hug and said thank you for the NCBI program” *Pam*

“One of my students who went through NCBI training last year told me that his brother had committed suicide. He has this great set of friends from NCBI that helped him. The next time I saw him he was excited to tell me he is going to the next NCBI training.” *Samantha*

Additional outcomes specifically on discipline issues

“I’m director of support services, and NCBI helped me with parents, especially with the volatile parents, letting them vent, letting them talk through it, and then trying to work to a resolution. I let parents know that we’re here for the same purpose, to educate their child, not to exclude their children from school. I have conversations with my colleagues, principals and vice principals, helping them look at how to issue discipline in a more equitable way. There are other things we can do besides the ultimate consequence of suspension. If we exclude a child from school that’s already truant, that’s already failing, all we’re doing is contributing to the drop-out rate.” *Bob*

“I’m Educational Services Coordinator. The ways that I’ve been using the NCBI skills is to make sure that listening is of utmost importance to me when I’m speaking with teachers, hearing their issues, being able to help them work through those issues. I’ve been able to provide professional development for teachers on best ways to work with parents and students. We find that one of

the areas that our teachers feel like they need better tools is communicating effectively with parents. Many teachers don't feel comfortable to even make phone calls with parents. We help them use NCBI skills in these calls.” *Gail*

“With discipline, it's easy to give a consequence. If a student is saying a derogatory term or word, it's easy to just go straight to the consequence. But if I sit down at a desk next to the student and talk to them about it, I have a real conversation. For example, some of my male students kept saying a derogatory term towards females. And I sat down and talked to them. If I just gave them discipline, they're going to still say it when I'm not there and they're with friends. But if I talk to them about how that's probably actually making the girl feel, and they tell me the truth about why they feel they can say that, the behavior will change when I'm not there, and that's really important to me.” *Samantha*

“Parents call requesting to have their child moved from a certain class because of a teacher's accent. Immediately, the first thing I want to say is, “Oh my gosh, you live in California, get over it!” But I listen to their ‘ouch’ always first, because many times they're just wanting their child to be successful, and they're just concerned that maybe their child's needs aren't being met. I listen to them, I make sure that I'm aware of their concern first, and then I let them know that it's actually a benefit to be exposed to teachers with accents earlier on, because when the student goes off to college, many times that's the case, especially with math and science. After I've listened, I look at the other issues: are they missing assignments, are they turning it in, are they asking for help, are they going to tutoring, and the parent suddenly realizes, wow, maybe I was wrong.” *Violet*

“I teach history and I think like a historian. I look and draw conclusions and make judgments and quick assessments. It's a lot of quick decision making. Having been part of NCBI, I know taking the time to not focus on the problem, per se, but focus on how the person feels. Oftentimes what I need to do is pause; listen and allow that person to work through it.” *Chrishen*

“I had a parent send me a very angry e-mail because of information that the parent had received from the student. But the parent hadn't spoken to me at all about what the other side of the story was. Using my NCBI skills, I had a meeting with the parent, and now, both parents and I are working very closely on the success of this student.” *Pandora*

“From an administrator's perspective dealing with a student in discipline, it does take more time to get to know that child and find out what's going behind the scenes, and I think that has a very positive effect on the outcome. It takes more time up front, but it really saves you a lot of time, because you're probably not gonna have an angry parent calling on you. Instead you communicated with the parent and the child together about how we're trying to correct behavior.” *Bob*

“I have found that I've begun to be sought out for advice, and afterwards, they sometimes say, “you just NCBIed me.” I hadn't realized how much those skills are embedded in what I do. I'm stopped constantly on campus, going from point A to point B, because there are issues that students want to engage and talk to me about, and there are teachers looking for information on how to more effectively make and bring about changes with their students.” *Bernard*

“We’re making a conscious effort to not discipline. I have issues with that, because I don't care what nationality or what color a particular child is. If there's an infraction, the infraction needs to be dealt with. And to only look at the numbers, to help the numbers is not helping the students. We don't want people thinking that to reduce racism, you stop disciplining altogether. That abandons the young people. One way we're addressing the issue is to have administrators come into the classroom to observe good teaching. That's a positive direction, as a former teacher, a former vice principal, and a former principal, the relationship that's made in the classroom with teacher, with students, eliminates a lot of discipline problems. We're not telling principals don't suspend kids. We are telling them that using the NCBI skills will replace the need to discipline.”

Bob