

## REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

### Unearthing Hidden Gems in an American Public High School: A Three-Pronged Approach to Meeting the Needs of Diverse Students

By Carlos M. Beato and Daniel J. Sass

Julian was barely 5'2. He couldn't have weighed more than 100 pounds. But he was an ideal wide midfielder on the International High School at Langley Park (IHSLP) soccer team. He had arrived in Maryland from El Salvador only eight months earlier, and he spoke very little English, but nobody at the school did at the time. In fact, the school was only a few weeks old, and it was designed specifically for students like Julian. All 99 students were English language learners, and the vast majority were recently-arrived immigrants and refugees from all over the world. Students who had fled war in Syria and Iraq, hunger in Ethiopia and Eritrea, gang violence in Central America, oppression in Cuba, and poverty in Haiti had found a home at IHSLP.

Julian stood out from the crowd almost immediately. His earring and gold chain necklace were the perfect complement to the shooting star that had been buzzed into the side of his faux hawk fade. He had a different girl on his arm in the cafeteria on what seemed like a weekly rotation. And while he was quiet and reserved in the classroom, his personality came to life on the soccer field. He was quick and shifty and loved making runs in behind the defense. He seemed more content with making the perfect pass than with scoring the perfect goal, and he was a tenacious defender. The captain, a classmate from Côte d'Ivoire, would hoist Julian in the air like the Stanley Cup trophy after every goal. And win, lose, or draw, Julian always left the field with a smile on his face.

Barely a month after the soccer season had concluded, Julian was arrested and was charged as an adult with first-degree murder for his role in a gang-related killing in Langley Park.

When IHSLP opened in 2015, it aimed to be a wraparound school, a place where members of the community could gain access to legal services, fresh food, and medical services all under one roof. We knew this would take time, but we were committed to building a school that was "more than just a school." Julian's arrest just four months after we opened our doors and welcomed students from more than 15 countries threatened to derail all the progress we had made. But it also sparked a sense of urgency within our school community.

Our students were living with very real, very complex, very raw traumas, and these traumas could manifest themselves at any moment. That first year saw instances of drug usage, alcoholism, suicidal ideation, teen pregnancy, family reunification conflict, gang affiliation, frequent and repeated classroom disruptions, temporary homelessness, bullying, sexting, and seemingly random outbursts of violence. These traumas were layered and deep-seated and very much interwoven into the fabric of students' daily lives.

So while a three-month soccer season undoubtedly provided Julian with an escape and a respite, it soon became very clear that he needed something much more comprehensive. We needed a school-wide plan to best address these traumas, and we needed to do it quickly. The future of our school and the well-being of our students depended on it.

Together with CASA and the Internationals Network for Public Schools [INPS], Prince George's County (Maryland) Public Schools received a three-million-dollar grant from the Carnegie Foundation to open two international schools ([Wiggins, 2014](#)). The schools were started as a response to the abysmal graduation rates of English learners (EL) in the district. In 2014, when the district received the grant, only 55.52% of ELs

were graduating on time, and this percentage declined in 2016 to 49.6%. Similarly, the dropout rate for EL students was increasing while the non-EL population rates have been decreasing ([MSDE, 2016](#)). This was also an opportunity to give ELs in the district a choice in where they would attend high school, and it would give them access to a specialized program. At that time, and historically, fewer than 1% of ELs were accessing specialized programs at the high school level. Of the 99 students that started with IHSLP in its first year, 28 arrived in the country and started schooling directly at IHSLP.

When the bell rings at our school, you have the opportunity to experience a melting pot of cultures firsthand. You may connect with a Nepali student aspiring to be a doctor, or a Cuban boy heavily invested in the arts, or a Guatemalan student who wants to be a teacher. In 2021, not much has changed in terms of demographics, with the exception of an increase in enrollment now that the school is fully functional. Almost 94% of students receive free and reduced meals, over 90% of students are classified as ELs, and around 90% of students identify as Latinx ([MSDE, 2020](#)).

Most of the students at IHSLP have taken the physically and emotionally-draining journey across multiple international borders to put themselves in a position to graduate from an American high school. They have fled war, poverty, sexual violence, abuse, hunger, famine, and corruption in search of safety and stability. Some have overcome the social-emotional trauma that comes with extended family separation and have reunited with parents.

Others have left their families behind in their native countries as they flee gangs and persecution, only to arrive in America and find that pursuing an education in a foreign language without familiar support systems is not nearly as easy as it sounds. The wars and caravans that we read about in newspapers and watch on CNN represent real-life experiences for the students and families that we serve. Understanding this premise, we set out to professionally develop our staff around the integration of SEL practices in the classroom in year one. We wanted to build awareness and capacity around the very things that historically have triggered students to dismiss academics and often lead to higher-than-average drop-out rates in the Latinx community ([McFarland, Cui, Holmes & Wang, 2020](#)).

For many, sitting in that first circle in year one was the first time that they were offered an opportunity to engage in restorative justice practices. The idea of having open and honest conversations amongst adults in school buildings could scare anyone, but centered on the idea of growth mindset, we were all on a journey to become better educators and to create a community that was grounded on these beliefs. And then, there was the talking piece.

This was an opportunity for all of us to bring something near and dear to us. It was a representation of our voice in our circles and gave us a sense of superpower to bring anything to the discussion that we thought needed to be said. Little did our staff know, we were modeling an expectation for what would become the structure of our advisory setting. After all, we were set on creating opportunities for adults that would mirror what should be happening with students in the classroom space.

We referred to this as “One learning model for all,” a term coined by our partners at INPS. In order to ground our work, we paired our understanding of restorative justice with a close reading of “Enrique’s Journey,” by Sonia Nazario, to give us a window into the young adult lives that would soon be walking through our doors. While the book helped us to understand some of the intricacies of our students’ lives, it could never prepare us for what was to come.

Our first year in advisory was the beginning of a foundation in the exploration of our core values of empowerment and collaboration. We explored themes that could hinder or expand on student learning. Advisors touched on topics like trauma, explored college and career options, and helped students further develop their reading skills through Reading Plus, which we still use to measure reading comprehension

growth as we aim to further close the reading gap that exists for our multilingual learners. Teachers used this space to be able to identify needs for students in their path to success and make the necessary referrals to our Student Success Office.

As our first school year came to a close, IHSLP's suspension rate hovered around 14%. Countless studies show that black and Hispanic-origin youth are more than twice as likely as their white peers to be suspended from school ([Fowler, 2011](#)). The enforcement of school disturbance laws and the prevalence of zero-tolerance discipline policies gave rise to a School-to-Prison pipeline that is still very much in effect today. A recent study by *Education Week* found that school resource officers are disproportionately placed in schools with a higher percentage of black and brown students: 74% of Black students and 71% of Hispanic/multiracial students in the study were found to attend school with a resource officer ([Blad, 2017](#)). Realizing very quickly that IHSLP was part of the problem, we designed a summer professional development series centered on restorative justice and on the facilitation of Circles of Power and Respect.

Thus, our challenge at IHSLP became twofold. How could we incorporate trauma-informed practices into every component of our academic and extracurricular programming, and how could we leverage restorative justice practices to begin the long overdue healing process for our students, our families, and our community members?

Any answer to these questions undoubtedly begins with Ricky. On a cold, rainy January morning, just two weeks after Julian had been formally charged with first-degree murder, Ricky arrived in the IHSLP main office. He was soaked from head to toe, and he tracked water into the office with each step. He had no backpack and no winter coat, and he parked his bicycle outside. With a surprising amount of confidence for a 15-year-old, he walked into the office and asked to speak with the principal.

While highly unusual for a student to walk into a principal's office without adult representation, this instance emphasized the need for our existence in the district as we employ culturally responsive strategies to engage our students and families. As Ricky narrated jaw-dropping accounts of neglect and a lack of support from the adult figures in his life, we quickly devised a plan to get him back in school as soon as possible. At the time, he had already been out of school for six months, and we knew that we had our work cut out for us from an academic, socioemotional, and language perspective. We were ready to meet his needs and felt confident that we could provide him some stability in his life, even if just for the seven hours that he would spend in school.

Ricky and Julian had been best friends in middle school, and Ricky was affiliated with the same MS-13 gang as Julian. While Julian had attended high school for four months prior to his arrest, Ricky had not. He was formally enrolled at a large comprehensive high school in his neighborhood, but he had not attended school in any capacity for more than seven months. He had arrived in Maryland the previous year to reunify with his mother, but upon discovering her alcoholism, he began to bounce from one living situation to the next, and he was currently living with a taxi driver who he had met through church.

Integrating Ricky into our school community would challenge us in ways we never could have imagined. Ricky was an English language learner with an interrupted formal education who had suffered from both physical and emotional abuse. He lacked stable housing, lacked access to regular meals, and was still very much processing the arrest of his best friend. At the same time, enrolling Ricky in IHSLP would mean that we would have to directly confront Julian's circumstances. We would have to give students a place to process and discuss. Put simply, if we were going to welcome Ricky into the IHSLP family, we were going to have to build the trauma-informed, restorative practices on the fly.

Over the next three years, IHSLP grew into a comprehensive, 9-12 high school with upwards of 400 students and 37 instructional and non-instructional faculty. Students who had fled their friends and their families and

their languages and their cultures ultimately found community, tasted success, and demonstrated that with the right systems, supports, and structures in place, anything is possible.

While there are a variety of factors that have contributed to student success, the most innovative (and arguably most indispensable) center on mastery-based learning and grading and our three-pronged approach towards trauma-informed practices and restorative justice.

Mastery-based learning and grading considers the fact that our students (who now represent more than 30 countries and more than 15 primary languages) are bringing a diverse array of skill sets, mindsets, and academic experiences into the classroom with them every day. Our instructional vision supports the notion that students learn at different rates, and it enables and empowers teachers to adjust their pacing, differentiate their learning materials, and scaffold their instruction to best meet the needs of all students.

This asynchronicity has been life-changing for our students. No longer are the most vulnerable ELLs “failing” classes. Our approach functions like a driver’s license road test. If I pass on the first try, I get a license. If you fail on your first try, your second try, and your third try; if you need materials translated into Spanish or Arabic or Romanian or Dutch or Farsi; if you need visual aids or an at-home tutor or increased hours on the road with a private instructor in order to finally pass on your fourth try, you too will obtain a license. And nothing will differentiate my license from your license. We are both licensed drivers, ready to navigate whichever roads may one day lie ahead.

Our three-pronged approach towards trauma-informed practices and restorative justice is centered on the assumption that all our students have experienced trauma in some capacity in their lives. With a student population that is almost entirely composed of migrant youth, many students carry a triplicate of trauma from their lives in their home countries, their lives during their journeys to America, and their lives in America.

By adhering to trauma-informed practices, we have trained all our teachers to be restorative justice practitioners. Instead of punitively suspending students for behavioral infractions, we seek to simultaneously rehabilitate behaviors, actions, and mindsets, restore trust, and repair relationships. We understand that this is a complex, nuanced process, and we collaboratively work to ensure that we are meeting the unique needs of all students. It is not uncommon to see social workers, counselors, teachers, administrators, advisors, community liaisons, students, and parents all working together to pinpoint the best academic and social-emotional interventions for students, and it is precisely because of this collaboration that we have been able to reduce our suspension rate from nearly 14% in year one to 2.9% in year six.

**Prong one:** Our Student Success Office [SSO] is designed and structured so that students and adults are able to develop close-knit, meaningful relationships that allow us all to feel safe. Students and families are able to check in with advisors, who are then able to inform our Student Success Office of any anomalies in a student’s socioemotional well-being. Our SSO is composed of two counselors, two social workers, a community school coordinator, a parent outreach caseworker, and various social work and counseling college interns through a partnership with University of Maryland. This was personal to us because we did not want our students to be in a school building without the appropriate support, like the 14 million students that attend school with police presence but no counselors, social workers, psychologists and other support personnel ([Mann et. al., 2019](#)).

By knowing and understanding each student and their daily triggers, we are better equipped to support them from a trauma-informed perspective to ensure that they can engage in academics. Topics can range from family reunification to immigration services that students may not otherwise be able to access because of a lack of resources. Our school’s vision and framework ensure our students that they will receive a holistic education and that adults in our building are also privy to such support. SSO has built in structures wherein teachers have the space to work on socioemotional development activities and self-care activities.

**Prong two:** Leveraging community partnerships has helped to build a school culture that very much emphasizes the importance of “the village.” When hiring staff members at IHSLP, we are transparent about the fact that we ask all instructional and non-instructional faculty to wear multiple hats. During the instructional day, our staff members often double as crisis counselors or social workers or parental figures. And when the school day ends, they morph into coaches and club sponsors accordingly.

Our ESOL teacher oversees the popular Anime Club, a passion she picked up while teaching abroad in Japan, and one of our social workers works with students to plan school wide events as the Student Government Association Sponsor. Countless studies have shown that representation matters ([Dilworth & Coleman, 2014](#)). It is incredibly empowering for our students to see themselves as captains, yearbook editors, and National Honor Society presidents. But it is equally important for them to have creative and intellectually stimulating outlets through which they can express themselves after the school day, and our teachers are only capable of wearing so many hats.

Our community partnerships have served as the perfect supplement to our focus on content, critical thinking skills, social-emotional learning, and language growth. Through partnerships with non-profit organizations in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, local colleges and universities, area sports programs, local businesses, and local government initiatives, we have effectively been able to make a staff of 37 feel like a staff of 137. For three hours every day after the dismissal bell rings, our students can immerse themselves in a variety of extracurricular activities. Some, like our “Future Doctors Club” facilitated by a Virginia-based non-profit and our “Student Research” club facilitated by a PhD candidate at the University of Maryland, actively support instruction and target students with clear post-secondary academic goals.

Others, like the I Learn America Story Share led by a prominent New York City-based film director, support students’ mental health by promoting the cathartic writing and “performing” of student migration narratives. And still others, like the Mi Espacio program led by the non-profit CASA, aim to alter students’ academic trajectories through tutoring and other targeted academic interventions. In just six years, thanks to our vast array of partnerships, our students have visited the White House and the United States Capitol Building, advocated for access to opportunity at local colleges and universities, and served as featured panelists and speakers at the Latin American Education Forum at Harvard, the Kids in Need of Defense Gala in New York City, and the iNACOL/Aurora Institute Symposium in Florida. We strongly believe that student engagement must be a 24-hour endeavor, and we have worked collaboratively with our community partners to make this possible.

**Prong three:** Sport-based youth development was a critical component of our mission to redefine the traditional eight-hour school day. Student trauma does not disappear when the dismissal bell rings every afternoon. Student needs do not magically evaporate. In fact, one could make the argument that the afternoon hours, after the conclusion of a school day, are equally as vital as the instructional hours in providing academic and social-emotional support and stability for black and brown students.

At IHSLP, we very purposefully aimed to build an interscholastic sports program centered on sports-based youth development. First, we attempted to fill all head coaching and assistant coaching positions with IHSLP staff members. To wit: the assistant principal, AP World History teacher, AP Spanish teacher, AP English teacher, AP Human Geography teacher, AP Calculus teacher, social worker, academic counselor, security guard, and lead substitute teacher all serve as coaches.

Secondly, we sought to infuse our core values of empowerment, collaboration, and critical thinking directly into our sports programming. In doing so, we hoped that our student body would come to view athletics as merely an extension of the school day, and we hoped that participation in extracurricular, interscholastic sports would become the norm for a population that has historically been underrepresented in such activities.

What resulted was an athletics program almost entirely built upon access to opportunity, skill building, safety, cultural competence, and the holistic integration of community resources. While there is still a competitive aspect present in our programming (our boys Varsity soccer team has won three consecutive Regional Championships, and our girls advanced to the Regional Final in 2019), winning is not a central component. Instead, we aim to ensure that every student who wants to engage in a desired activity can do so under the guidance and supervision of a caring adult educator and with the support of the larger school community.

We know that participating in athletics increases our students' likelihood for postsecondary academic success. More than 50% of IHSLP graduates currently enrolled in a two-year college, a four-year college, or a trade school played at least one sport during their four years of college. But more importantly, these same students had a safe, supportive, structured space that kept them out of a neighborhood that was recently described by *The Washington Post* as a place where "people live in fear" and "MS-13 menaces" residents ([Miller & Morse, 2017](#)).

Students who had never held a tennis racquet or thrown a baseball have had opportunities to represent their school and their community while doing something that brings them joy. And although many soccer practices were spent playing futsal on the cafeteria floor, and many track practices were spent running up and down stairwells, IHSLP graduates are now playing soccer and running track and cross country in college. And still others have leveraged sports to begin pursuing a career in teaching and coaching.

Julian ultimately served his sentence in a juvenile facility. On his 18th birthday, he was transferred to an ICE detention facility, and he was later deported back to El Salvador.

But Ricky's trajectory differed quite drastically from that of his friend.

Ricky benefited from what we like to call "radical compassion." Ricky tapped into all three prongs of IHSLP's approach to trauma and restorative justice. He met regularly with a team of social workers, counselors, and interns, and he participated in a variety of focus groups -- one for family reunification, one for truancy, one for grief, one for gang prevention. His social worker helped him find temporary housing security that eventually turned into permanent housing security. He participated in an after-school photography program facilitated through a partnership with the World Lens Foundation, and he was part of IHSLP's first group of students to receive tutoring and mentorship through a partnership with the University of Maryland College of Education. A partnership with a legal aid non-profit helped Ricky navigate the complexities of his immigration status, and still another partnership provided him with an opportunity to play soccer year round at no cost. He joined the wrestling team in the winter and the track team in the spring, and on any given day, Ricky was under the supervision of IHSLP staff members from approximately 7:00 AM until 8:00 PM.

During his senior year, Ricky started every game for the IHSLP soccer team at wide midfielder, the same position his friend Julian had occupied three years earlier. On a Tuesday afternoon in early November, under a bright pink-orange sunset, he played a full 80 minutes to help IHSLP win its second consecutive regional championship. When the final whistle blew, he ran over to the sideline and hugged his principal, his assistant principal, and his new "family."

Ricky was accepted to every college he applied to, and he is currently a sophomore at a private liberal arts school in upstate New York. He gave up soccer for ultimate frisbee, but he still loves creative writing and photography, and he recently took a ballet class. He hopes to pursue a career in child psychology, and he wants to help young people manage their stress and trauma.

Sadly, there are still too many students like Ricky walking through American hallways, and there are too few schools prepared or designed to meet the challenges faced by students like Ricky. And while we have a lot of

work to do to equip schools around the nation to meet those needs, Ricky's story serves as an example of the power that one institution can have on shaping the future and altering the trajectory of its students.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



As Co-Director at Next Generation Learning (NGL), Carlos Beato ensures excellence in program delivery, tools development, internal flow, and organizational learning and serves as the NGL “practice ambassador.” Carlos also works on transformational design and infusing DEI/social justice into what the organization does on a daily basis. In his previous life he was a teacher, assistant principal, college counselor and founded the International HS at Langley Park, a school for English language learners.



Daniel Sass is the assistant principal at School In The Square, a public charter middle school in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Prior to that, he served as the founding assistant principal at the International High School at Langley Park, a public high school in Prince George's County, Maryland, that exclusively serves English Language Learners and newcomer students (i.e. immigrant, refugee, asylee). He was a 2009 Teach For America corps member in Baltimore City, where he taught secondary English for six years, and he holds degrees from The University of Michigan and The Johns Hopkins University School of Education.

