

Baltimore City Association of School Psychologists



Special Issue Spring 2015

President's Pen

Trying to find the words for **this upcoming newsletter's** presidential pen has been difficult. I found myself struggling to find a way to capture the thoughts and emotions of not only our staff, but our students and the communities in which we serve and live. I found myself trying to wrap my mind around what has occurred in our city and condense those thoughts into a 500 word passage.

Reflecting upon my own thoughts and feelings, I de-

cidated to have the BCASP board publish a special edition of our newsletter to highlight positive ways we influence our students to be strong, independent, and successful members of society. Additionally, I wanted to frame the many ways that our students channel their emotions and feelings during times of such instability, trepidation, and unease.

The pain in our city is deep but not new. The struggle of our city is constant and real.

However, the dedication that we as School Psychologists provide to this City, associated communities, and our students is unwavering.

We hope this special edition will shed some light on the Baltimore City Public School system and allow for others to see what a great place it is to work and live here.

Thank you.

Nadine Serbonich

John Ruhrah Elementary/Middle School

Mallory Ungs

The kindergarten students gathered outside to make a human peace sign (pictured below). While we were making the peace sign, the students were really excited to be making something "way bigger than us". They talked about how even though they couldn't see what we looked like, they were excited that [school staff] could see us from the building. They discussed how people in planes and space could look down and see our peace sign. When we were sharing about what was happening in our city, the students focused on how to tell people with words what they didn't like, "not stealing and hurting." They talked about how people should listen more to what the "mad and sad people" were saying. Students were really positive, noting that even though some people "broke" our city, they were happy to see people starting to "fix it," mentioning the cleaning efforts the day after the riots. Students also said that people shouldn't be mean to police and others because they were mad at a particular police officer or person. A lot of my students talked about how the city needed more hugging and more ice cream. One of my favorite things a little boy said, was "I'd give the cops ice cream, they have been out in the hot all day!"



A Constant Education

Written By: Lisa Austin

“We as school psychologists are so fortunate that we are able to offer a safe space. We have the opportunity to be the adult they can come to when they need a non-judgmental ear.”

Regardless of our origin stories, when we took jobs as school psychologists with Baltimore City Schools, I imagine the majority of us attempted to prepare ourselves for challenges we had yet to encounter, which in turn would require solutions we had yet to design. That said, there was not an amount of time spent in the city that could have prepared us for the challenges we confronted in the wake of **Freddie Gray’s death. Not just the challenge of processing the tragic death of a former Baltimore City Student, but the impact it was having on the community and current students.**

On Sunday morning May 26th, I was in Kentucky when I turned on the T.V. in my hotel room to see pictures and video of three of my students vandalizing a **police car. At first, I was incredulous. I’m seeing this in Kentucky on CNN! I was heartbroken; heartbroken for our city and for those children, one of whom I have gotten to know well over past three years. There is no preparing for that. I had eight hours in the car to process what was happening. All of the solutions I came up with required more than I could muster on my own. However, like I tell the students I work with, “Identify the problem, focus on what you have control over, and find a way to control it. Do not get bogged down by all the other stuff—that’s just white noise. Do not let it distract you—*focus!*”**

Then Monday night happened and there were fires and looting within two blocks of my school in East Baltimore. More heartbreak led to more self-talk, **“Control what you have control over.”** So Tuesday morning I got up, drove to McElderry Park in Baltimore to meet the Assistant Principal of one of my schools, and we cleaned up. The positive energy and community support was palpable. In the wake of so much disappointment, the smiles and civic responsibility was a manifestation of the amazing spirit Baltimore possesses. At that moment, I considered myself so fortunate. Fortunate because I live and work in Baltimore City and I witness that amazing spirit everyday.

When Wednesday came, I was uncertain about what I would find at my high school in Cherry Hill. By the end of the day, I was shown (yet again) how fortunate I am to have the job I do. Like I am sure many of you experienced, I had a constant stream of traffic in and out of my office all day. Some students would stay for only **a couple of minutes, “Just checking in Mrs. Austin, wanted to see how you were doing.” (that was probably the most polite request for support I have ever encountered). Many students were not sure how to talk about Freddie’s death and its aftermath. More students still did not even know the details of Freddie’s death and needed a safe place to ask questions and an even safer place to process and respond to those details. We as school psychologists are so fortunate that we are able to offer a safe space. We have the opportunity to be the adult they can come to when they need a non-judgmental ear.**

I would like to think that those who take the time, money and energy to complete a graduate program to become a School Psychologist do so for more than spring breaks and summers off. We are caretakers. Whether we are taking care by being a warden of the IEP process, or by using our training and empathy to provide a safe and therapeutic place for children to speak their mind and get help deciphering their universe. The act of caretaking goes both ways; the students I met with at my high school and my K-8 showed a level of compassion and sagaciousness that belied their age and demonstrated their caretaking skills.

I had a conversation with one student in particular that was so enlightening and provided insight that I had been struggling to put into words. As we discussed the

A Constant Education, Cont.

riots, it came up that people were having a hard time understanding, much less empathizing, with why people would burn their own neighborhood. I told him one person said to me, "It's like burning down your own house. Why would you **burn down your own house?**" I asked him how he would want me to try to explain that to them. This was his (paraphrased) response:

"What if you hated your house? What if your house wasn't safe? What if the roof was falling in and you didn't have any running water and the air was dangerous to breathe and the paint could make you sick? What if you hated your house for all of those reasons, but nobody would fix it? What if you hated your house for all of those reasons, and no one cared enough to have it condemned. Well, you might burn that f**er down. You might say if nobody's going to pay attention while it's still standing, maybe they will pay attention when it's burning."**

How many people do you know have the opportunity to have these conversations? How many people are allowed the benefit of not only helping kids like this, but also being helped in return? In preparing to become School Psychologists, we took so many classes and wrote so many papers and scored so many protocols. We are still learning by way of personal research, professional development and supervision. Yet, those are not the only ways we become better clinicians. Life is a constant education. I consider it part of my continuing development to hear as much as my students care to tell me. It is part of our education to gain understanding about the lives and struggles and circumstances of the children we serve. It is part of our job to gain this information so that we can more accurately empathize with and then support our students. Empathy (and its application) is not about making excuses. It is not about the avoidance of holding children accountable for their decisions. It is about being able to communicate comprehensively and supporting students in working through those decisions. That empathy is shown in our ability to demonstrate consistent and genuine guidance, and this sincere furtherance is what fosters positive change.

We are so fortunate. We are able to be the adult who builds a relationship with these students. We are able help them conceptualize that while perhaps their life circumstances may have taught them they cannot always count on others to meet their physical or emotional needs, that is not how life has to always be. We are able to see the resilience, strength, and determination of children who face struggles that would make a lot of us throw in the towel. Not only do we get to help these children, but in doing so we become better practitioners. Through increased understanding, exposure, and empathy we in turn become better people. How many people can say that? How many people can say that because of the work they do every day, work that has the opportunity to help so many, they have realized personal growth in themselves? Again, we are so fortunate.

It is not an easy job and sometimes it makes your heart hurt. Few things that foster growth and improvement are easy, and gaining strength does not happen without aching muscles. So work through the pain. Gain strength, gain insight, **and control what you have control over...which I know at times can seem like** such a small insignificant piece. We are all just one person, and that can make our small daily actions seem unimportant. When I feel like I am bailing water out of a boat that has a hole in it, I look at a quote hanging in my office, **"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."**

Now, go be awesome.

"Life is a constant education. I consider it part of my continuing development to hear as much as my students care to tell me. "

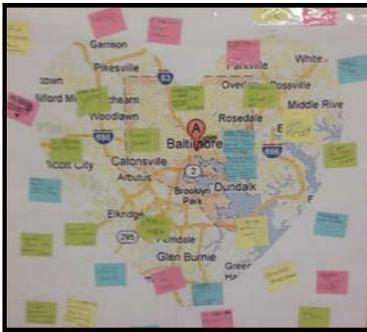
School Psychologists Supporting Students



Reginald F. Lewis High School

Catherine Stuart

The mental health clinicians and school psychologists at Reginald F. Lewis High School worked together on a school-wide project to support the students, teachers, and staff in moving forward from the incidents that have occurred in the last week. We created posters with a map of Baltimore in the shape of heart, and gave out sticky notes for students, staff, and teachers to write things that they like about Baltimore or things they hope will change for the better. The goal of this project was to allow students and staff to express themselves in peaceful and positive ways, along with providing an opportunity for our youth to know their voices were being heard. We had many high school students (including our Life Skills students), teachers, and staff members (including school police officer, custodians, secretaries, APs, counselors, social workers) participate in the project. Many participants commented that they liked focusing on the positive things that were happening in the city as a way to help them move forward. We also noticed that some students had difficulty identifying positive things as a result of the adversity that they have been facing for so long. However, when provided with examples and encouragement, they were able to identify positive things about their city or things they hope to see change.



Northwestern High School

Miriam Yarmak

Mental health staff (including school psychologist, school-based community mental health therapist, and school social worker) met individually and in small groups with students and teachers to discuss and process the events. After consultation with teachers, administrators, other mental health providers, and of course students, it was determined that a more systematic approach to helping students process these events was needed. To that end, over the next several days, the school psychologist and school-based community mental health therapist visited over a dozen English classrooms to facilitate discussions with students in a safe and supportive environment. Students who were identified by teachers/staff as needing additional support were seen one-on-one by the school social worker. The mental health team met with the principal to discuss take-aways from the classroom interventions. Plans are being made to create a video project to showcase the students' positive reactions/hopes for the future.



School Psychologists Supporting Students

Yorkwood Elementary School

Kerri Jean Carter

With the tragic events in our city and the vast array of emotions felt by our students and staff, there needed to be an outlet for everyone to peacefully express their feelings for the events that took place over the past week. I was deployed to my home school of Yorkwood Elementary in East Baltimore where students and staff shared a feeling of sadness and confusion about the destruction of the city. Throughout the week during lunch shifts, the clinicians and I set up a table with drawing supplies and Bunting Flags— aka “Peace Flags” for the elementary school. Each student decorated one peace flag during lunch with positive messages about Baltimore. We had a great response from both students and staff on this positive message to our community. Students wrote things like “B’more Respectful,” “Have Faith not hate,” “We love our City,” “Protect this City we call home,” etc. The flags were laminated and strung up around the lobby for our school community to read.



Frederick Douglas High School

Gail Keller

Last week at Douglas High School , many members of the Mayor’s Office Staff as well as Red Cross Workers visited our classrooms to help the students process their feelings and offer assistance to our staff. Two members of the FBA team from North Avenue joined us as members of our Crisis Trauma Team. Members of the Baltimore Ravens Football Team also paid us a visit including Ray Lewis and Coach John Harbaugh. Ray Lewis gave a wonderful inspirational talk at our school-wide general assembly. He put a smile on the faces of many of the students who had been affected by arrests and looting in their neighborhoods. Ray also talked informally with the Douglas Ducks Football Team before he left and promised to try to visit one of their games. While there were Humvees and National Guard Soldiers with rifles across from the school, our Crisis Trauma Team’s work was enhanced by the many wonderful, caring visitors to our building. Their presence helped us meet the needs of our students and staff during a very trying period. Many thanks to all that helped.



School Psychologists Supporting Students

Baltimore Montessori School

Kate Shoemaker

Students at Baltimore Montessori Public Charter School created cards and letters of unity to send to Gilmore Elementary. The students will also be creating art projects (friendship bracelets, or a whole tapestry made in a loom) to provide to those students and school staff as a way to support those most impacted in West Baltimore. Additionally, our students and school community are collecting toiletries and basic necessities to give to seniors in the Senior Residences located behind the CVS that was burned down.



Northwestern High School

Laura Grubb

At Northwestern High School, I sat in on an assembly preparing students for the sight of national guardsmen and armed policemen on their bus routes, instructing them on how to make their way peacefully home. The students made a banner reading "I am somebody" and they invited students, teachers, and staff to sign.

Harlem Park Middle School

Laura Grubb

At Harlem Park, I helped middle school students put together a "Hands of Peace" banner. We cut out hand tracings from all the students and arranged them in the form of the word "Peace," a cross, and a peace sign, while discussing their feelings about recent developments in the Freddie Gray case, their experiences with police, and their thoughts on their role in making things better in their community.



Celebrating Renewed Identity & Purpose in the Wake of Tragedy

Written By: Liz Niemiec

“I saw teachers come to life, facilitating conversations so outside of their comfort zones, embodying the traits I hope to exude as a school psychologist: patience, flexibility, empathy, and unparalleled understanding.”

The recent events in Baltimore City are rich with the pain that can only come in times of opportunity, growth, and change. For those of us, like me, who usually split our time between multiple schools, it was a surreal feeling to report to Windsor Hills Elementary Middle School for over a week straight. I suddenly went from a fleeting, 1.5 days a week, part-time psychological assessment conductor and IEP meeting attendee to a full-time, pivotal member of a community that I knew very little about.

I was given the opportunity to bond with my administration and fellow staff members in a way that I had never before experienced. I saw teachers come to life, facilitating conversations so outside of their comfort zones, embodying the traits I hope to exude as a school psychologist: patience, flexibility, empathy, and unparalleled understanding.

I saw students share the most simple, yet powerful statements of wonder, awe, and shock about the human condition and the political unrest in our city. I rallied with the other mental health providers in the building, working together to collect information and keep all staff united and informed as the week progressed.

It made me remember that same sense of fear and duty I felt when I first discovered the internship program offered here in Baltimore City. I had to decide if **picking up and moving my life to work in a “big, urban district, with big, urban problems” would be right for me. Only in hindsight do I now recognize how big** of a decision that was, and how that internship was the only thing that could have prepared me for these last few weeks.



Celebrating, Continued...

In the wake of these events, it is easy to want to “just get back to normal.” And after a week of being away from Digital Harbor High School, I re-entered the building nervous and disheartened at the thought of making up all of those missed services, entering countless encounter notes, and catching up with my seniors in the few precious days left to ensure a walk across that graduation stage.

But I could not have been prepared for how these few days would cause such a shift in my mentality. One after another, my students told me that they avoided all of the violence. Whether they marched to City Hall, spent their day-off cleaning up several neighborhoods alongside their teachers and families, or just stayed in their homes, the overwhelming sentiment was one of positivity and activism. Despite their very own personal, negative experiences with the police and justice system, they insisted that they were not going to be another statistic or meme on the internet.

My emails were full of the pictures you see on these pages, taken by one of our technology teachers, Anna McConnell. Links to news articles were shared, **quoting our SGA president, Darius Craig’s speech from his March for Understanding** on April 29th, and our journalism teacher, Daniel Sass, focusing on celebrating our students for who they are: students.

It feels odd to be so thankful for the unrest that has brought me to this place in my professional development. However, I stand by my admiration and gratitude to those who have suffered personal loss, anguish, and rage in order for countless others to find hope, unity, love, and the strength to build a better world, and live better lives. In their honor, I hope to continue to serve Baltimore City, our students, and their families.

“Despite their very own, personal, negative experiences with the police and justice system, [students] insisted that they were not going to be another statistic or meme on the internet.”



