

**Testimony Rosalva Nava, Leader with POWER-PAC  
Senate Congressional Briefing  
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Good afternoon, my name is Rosalva Nava from Chicago's Northwest side. I am a mother of 4 children, 2 of whom are still elementary school in Chicago Public Schools, and I am a Parent Peacemaker who, three days-a-week, practices restorative justice with young people at Wells High School not far from my home. Finally, I am also a proud leader with POWER-PAC, *Parents Organized to Win, Educate and Renew - Policy Action Council*, an association of parents and grandparents from across Chicago communities who are working to make our neighborhoods safer and healthier places for children and families. As POWERPAC, we have been campaigning since 2004 to improve school discipline by reducing ineffective, harsh punishments and by promoting positive alternatives like restorative justice in Chicago.

I am here today, as a parent, a Restorative Justice Practitioner, and a representative of POWER-PAC, to talk to you about Restorative Justice as an alternative to school push-out that works to create a safe and supportive environment for our children, and to ask for Federal support to implement more Restorative Justice Programs across the country!!!

I will share:

- 1) Why parents got together to better support our children and started our model of Peace Centers at schools where Restorative Justice is practiced.
- 2) What the Peace Center/Restorative Justice looks like at Wells High School
- 3) How we know Restorative Justice is working to create a more supportive and safer climate schools where we run Peace Centers

Before I get into our work at Wells High School, though, I want to share a personal story. Last spring, I got a call while I was at work that I needed to get to the school as soon as possible because my fourteen year old son “had been in an altercation”, and he was hurt. I hurried to the school afraid for my son’s safety. When I got to the school, the administration told me my son had been “beat up” – he had black eye and a swollen jaw. The Assistant Principal said she would suspend the boy who hurt my son, and asked me if I wanted to press charges. When I asked my son what happened and what he thought about the situation, he said they had been playing a rough game of basketball that gotten out of hand and ended in a fight. He did not want his friend arrested. Neither did I. Handcuffing this boy and arresting or suspending him, would not teach him anything. Would he then learn not to use violence next time? Arresting him wouldn’t help him learn from his mistakes or change his behavior. I told the school I did not want to press charges, but I worry that, if I had not stopped them they would have called the police on this child.

Situations like this happen too often. This is why, as POWERPAC, we have taken matters into our own hands by creating and running a parent-run, school-based “peace centers”! We use the philosophy and practices of “restorative justice”, a discipline approach which focuses on repairing the harm caused by the conflict, rather than just punishing the offender. We have proven that it is possible to address students’ misbehavior without pushing them out of school and onto the pipeline to prison.

Personally, I can speak about the Wells High School Peace Center where I am a Parent Peacemaker. Everyday three of us are at the Peace Center from 10:30 am to 2:30 pm running peace circles with students during their lunch periods. We offer a safe space and tools for conflict resolution. Our goal is to provide the youth with restorative justice tools and practices to help them deal peacefully with day-to-day conflicts.

Just five years ago, the school had a terrible reputation for violence and poor academics. One of the mothers from POWER-PAC, a Mexican immigrant, and a good friend of mine, who had lost her son to gun violence ( a recent graduate of Wells High), decided that a Peace Center in the school could help other students not follow in her sons' path. Working with the then principal, Dr. Ernesto Mattias, we launched the Wells Peace Center.

During our time running the Peace Center our Parent Peacemakers have developed relationships with students that started from a place of respect because we are parents from the neighborhood. It is these relationships which have not only have prevented gang fights, but have even helped several gang-involved youth leave the gang, and go on to graduate from Wells! Since I have been at the Peace Center, I have seen Restorative Justice help suicidal students hold on to life, and our work there has supported dozens of young people through situations including bullying, pregnancy, dating violence, homelessness, and violence in their homes, to name a few.

Through Restorative Justice students have found a safe haven where they have learned to take accountability for the harm they cause through their actions. They are learning to prevent harm and change their behavior. In fact, students now go into the

Peace Center themselves, without a referral asking for help with conflicts to avoid violence before it happens!!!

Now, just a few years later, the school has achieved a dramatic turnaround, lowering suspensions and arrests, reducing student misconduct, and improving academic performance. (After over a decade on academic probation, Wells is now off.) Our parent “peacemakers” continue to work with dozens of students each month, helping them to resolve conflicts and encouraging them to stay in school when they are struggling. Since the beginning of the year, we have seen 16 students referred to the peace center go from students with behavior problems to students on the Dean’s list! I can tell you first hand, the Peace Center had a tremendous effect on both the students who participate, and also on teachers and administrators and the school climate overall.

As our Illinois Senator Dick Durbin saw first-hand when he visited last year, the Peace Center at Wells High School is an innovative school-based program that helps students avoid suspension and arrest by involving them in restorative justice activities with our Peacemakers. We thank you for your interest in and your support of our work. Our model and other Restorative Justice models work. They have their communities behind them. But we cannot do it alone, we need Federal policy and funding support! Please invest in Restorative Justice!