

Natural Circles of Support

CONVERSATIONAL WEBINAR SERIES

EXPANDING ACCESS

MAY 18, 2017



What is it?

Natural Circles of Support (NCOS) is an assets-based and flexible approach to addressing racial and other disparities that draws out and builds on the **strengths and aspirations** of African American and other students of color, and builds on their **existing supportive relationships**.

Student Circle of Support



Meet in circle with facilitators **once a week** for 30-45 minutes

Create a **nurturing space** for **mutual support**

Participate in ways that affirm their **everyday lives** and **identities.**

Purpose of Circle Practice

- Encourage **positive and supportive peer relationships**
- Support **social-emotional development** through reflective practices and collective problem solving
- Promote **intellectual curiosity and growth**

Curriculum Framework



Mutual (peer) support

Collective action and efficacy

Intellectually enriching activities



Support for school staff

- ▶ Connecting the circle group to classroom
- ▶ Meetings and conversations with staff
- ▶ Informal coaching and support
- ▶ Professional development

2017: Current Circles of Support

- 10 schools, six school districts, 3 counties, over 30 circle cohorts, 300+ students

2014: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Pilot

- 3-year partnership to pilot concept—initially 4 groups in 4 schools. Success at Craig and Thoreau resulted in increased demand and unplanned expansion

2013: Thoreau Elementary: “We Can Do It” Grant

- Part of a three-year grant to address racial disparities in behavior and achievement

2012: A Different Voice: Examining Positive Youth Development in African American Girls through Youth Participatory Action Research

- 18-month school-based action research project for middle and high school African American girls

2011: Beyond Expectations

- First circles group in high school setting—9th and 10th grade African American boys who named the group “Beyond Expectations” because they wanted to go beyond the expectations others had of them and they had of themselves

2009: The Beloit Middle School Support Project

- 4-H inspired rocketry club and 8th grade “circles” group for 8th grade African American boys; added girls for the first time

2007: Parent Leadership Action Team

- First “world café” with parents and support for parent leadership for parents of color and working class parents

2005: The Kilembe Brotherhood

- First “circles” group for 5th grade African American boys; use of a story from *Hero with an African Face* with the theme of “watching for my brother and listening for my brother”

Circles of Support Milestones (2005-2017)



Getting Started

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS




*Relationships form the foundation for
transformational work and change.*



We believe

Regardless of background or family situation, **most children have people in their lives who care for and support them** at home, school and in their community.

Those closest to and **most affected** by racial and other disparities have a **necessary and indispensable role** to play in finding solutions.



“[T]he wisdom and creativity needed to solve an organization’s challenges lie with the people who work there. Much of our work...has to do with unleashing and harnessing that collective intelligence and power.”

Robert Gass, *Transforming Organizations*

We work as catalysts for change.

What we have found that by

Having a **clear analysis** of the presenting issues,
Discovering and **asking the right questions**,
Creating conditions for **care and affection**,
Giving **attention to purpose**, and
Fostering positive and **supportive relationships...**



School communities do amazing things and
find creative ways to work together for
sensible, workable solutions to disparities.