

School Leaders Doing the
Work the Right Way:

Building Walls Between
Schools and the
Justice System

RIVERHEAD CENTRAL SCHOOL
DISTRICT
LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK



RIVERHEAD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
Integrity • Creativity • Respect



With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, AASA profiled five school districts that are building walls between schools and the justice system, engaging in restorative practices, working to eliminate bias and disproportionality, and providing all children with fair and equitable access to high-quality opportunities. Districts profiled were Aldine ISD, Houston, TX; Brownsville Area School District, PA; St. Louis Public Schools, MO; Phoenix Union High School District, AZ; and Riverhead Central School District, NY. We sought districts that worked intentionally to reduced school-related juvenile justice interactions where the superintendent and school system played a key role in changes to limit youth interaction with law enforcement, school-based arrests, and juvenile justice. AASA created five district profiles and a sixth composite/summary profile of the districts' work to reduce school - related juvenile justice interactions.

Each district profiled noted the impact that Covid-19 had on their efforts. While time out of school due to the pandemic posed challenges for everyone, it also provided districts with opportunities to make bold moves, such as fully embracing Social, Emotional Learning (SEL) and eliminating SRO contracts.



Superintendent: Augustine Tornatore

Number of Students: 5,829

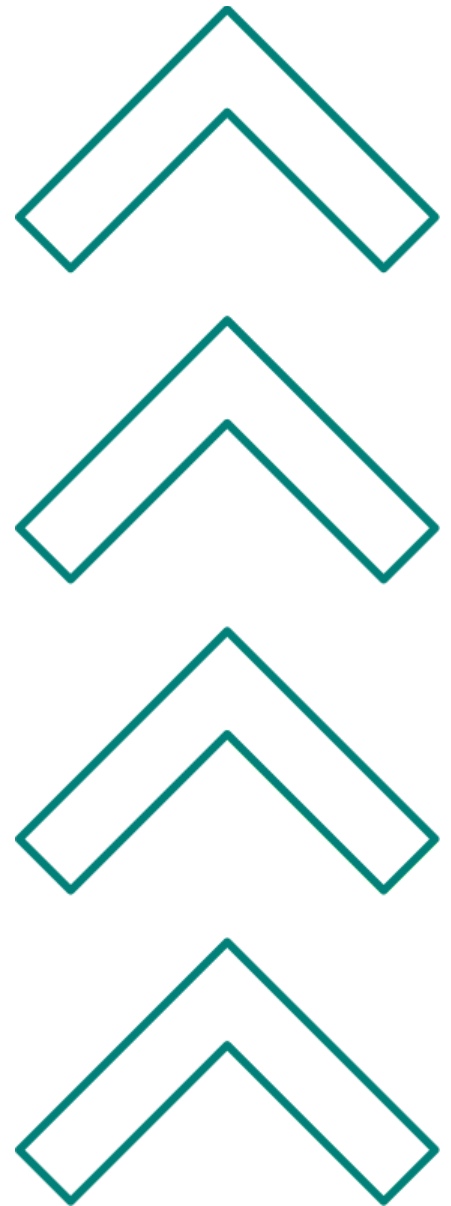
Demographics: 8% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 9% African American; 58% Hispanic; 1% Asian/Pacific Islander; 31% White; 2% Multiracial

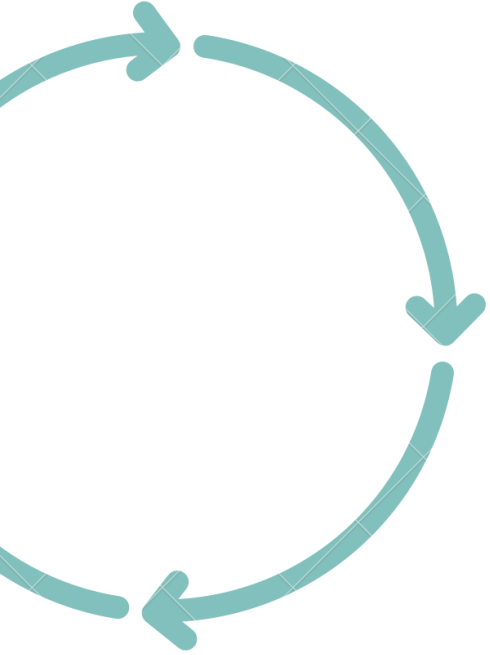
District Type: Suburban

Free And Reduced Meals (FARM) Rate: 62%

Riverhead Central School District: Located in Suffolk County on Long Island, N.Y., Riverhead Central School District draws students from three townships: Southampton, Brookhaven and Riverhead. The superintendent, Augustine Tornatore, has been in the district since July 1, 2021. This suburban district has just fewer than 6,000 students and is diverse, both racially and in socioeconomic status. Demographics in the district have changed over the past 20 years or so, with a growing population of English Language Learners (ELL) who come mostly from Guatemala. More than 20 languages are spoken in the district, but all materials, both written and spoken, are provided in English and Spanish. The Suffolk County jail is located within Riverhead's boundary. This jail serves as a reminder to school staff members to break the "poverty-to-prison pathway," as they work to meet the needs of all students. This includes providing universal free meals to all students.

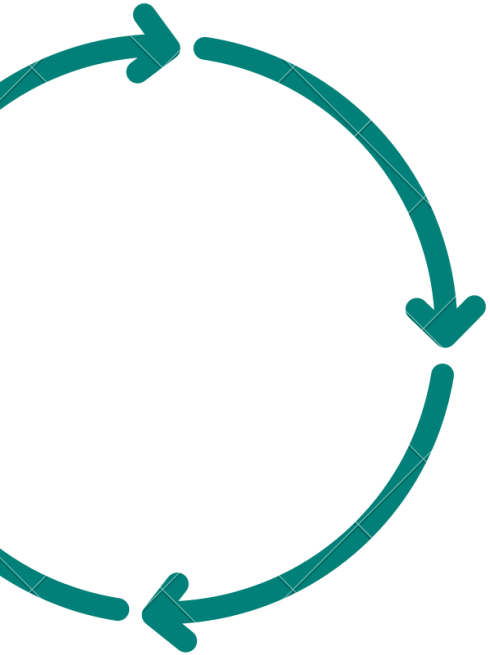
Catalyst for Change: The district noticed large numbers of in- and out-of-school suspensions in 2019. To combat the over-reliance on in- and out-of-school suspensions (ISS and OSS), the district moved to a restorative practice model that includes social workers and psychologists as part of the three-year implementation strategy. Although the district still utilizes progressive discipline, its reliance on it has decreased. The first round of 50 staff members was trained in summer 2021 and implementation began in the 2021-2022 school year. Training consisted of three full days of comprehensive training focused on change in language and processes towards students. The 50 trained staff members represent all of the schools in the district, and they were tasked with “planting the seeds of restorative practices in each building” and with creating a culture of care and healing as they look to the root causes of student behavior. This is built upon the district’s recognition of students’ need for respect. They are also working with students to be more self-reflective to figure out their own “why” as part of positive self-advocacy to manage their behavior. Students take responsibility, articulate the wrong of their actions and determine next steps to avoid future infringement. Often, conflict is associated with miscommunication, creating an importance on helping students reflect and respond. Restorative practice is implemented in the classroom and afterschool activities, as facilitators utilize restorative circles. In contrast to school detention or ISS, restorative circles create a new line of communication among students and facilitators. The district has noticed the power of language shifts regarding discipline and how the student interprets its value. Overall, the district wishes to differentiate the roles of a facilitator from those of a social worker. New restorative practices teams will be trained each year with full implementation set to occur in the 2023-2024 school year. With a concentration on improvements through quality evaluation and professional development, the district mantra is “People, not programs.”





Building principals, directors and the entire cabinet were in support of the adoption of restorative practices in the district. Administrators were trained over the summer as part of their professional development so that each school building has a trained team for implementation. No one approach fits all, so continued reflection and mediation are needed.

In hopes to foster student curiosity, social development and innovation, the district has implemented programs such as SNAPPY XO Robotics program, mixed-aged play club and K-12 Makerspace.



Police Department: Riverhead has its own security team that's employed by the district. The security chief is a retired police officer and most of the security officers live and work in the community with the students. Security officers have received restorative justice training that has changed the way they interact with students. They now focus on building relationships with students, using language that is warm and welcoming. At the high school level, the security officers learn student schedules, work to build relationships and are a caring adult for students. Law enforcement empathizes that sometimes rules are broken because a child's needs are not met.

Police involved Youth: Three police departments have jurisdiction over the students of Riverside, so when a student is arrested, the district must deal with the different departments. A New York State police barracks is also located within the district, so there is a heavy law enforcement presence in the area. Students who have been arrested/jailed are included in the district's population.


Transition Plan: Students who come back to school after an arrest or serving time work with guidance counselors and social workers to develop a transition plan back to school. A reentry plan will address or include an intervention for the behavior. For example, community awareness programs are for those with drug offenses to learn about drug abuse, use and education. The culminating piece to discipline involved individualized planning and risky behavior education. Moreover, mediation includes family involvement in decision-making. Students usually start back to school in the 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. program before reentering the traditional school day schedule. This has been found to be helpful and increases the likelihood of the student successfully completing high school.

The district also has a plan for student suspensions. Depending on the infraction or severity, the code of conduct requires a superintendent hearing. Repeated offenses or a suspension longer than five days is required, after which a superintendent hearing must be held.

Covid: COVID served to underscore the need for the district's restorative practices work. When students returned to in-person classes in fall 2021, the district was prepared to address their mental health and SEL needs as it implemented everything simultaneously at the start of the 2021-2022 school year. It increased the numbers of social workers, psychologists and counselors available to students. The focus was on the root causes of students' issues, which included an increased focus on communication to understand if behaviors were related to a mental health issue or a poverty issue, for instance.

Recognizing the unfinished learning caused by the pandemic, the district used the "By Ready" diagnostic as a pre-test for students. This generated individualized learning paths in which improvements could then be evaluated through post-testing in the spring.

The district provided tools for parents, too, as they have access to the ReThinkEd Social Emotional Learning tool used by the district. There was an increase in achievement after students returned to the classroom after COVID-19 due to the focus on mental health and SEL, as well as summer learning opportunities in 2021 and 2022. High school students received even more mental health and SEL support, along with opportunities for credit recovery to aid them in graduating successfully.



Sustainability: This work was undertaken with both support from the superintendent and the school board. The work related to sustainability is focused on funding for the new staff hired in support of restorative practices and mental health. Districts typically hire new staff tied to time-limited funding sources and that staff is not retained when the funding ends. The superintendent is looking at how to cut costs in other areas of the district's operating budget (e.g., solar power, and other infrastructure savings) so that these valuable staff members can continue in their roles to support students.

Disproportionality: Taking a different approach, the district looked at poverty as the marker to establish disproportionality. It received the My Brother's Keeper funding that it used to address low graduation rates in Black and Brown male students. (See table below.) As part of this program, it brought in motivational speakers of similar backgrounds to share how they became successful in spite of their circumstances. It also expanded the Career and Technical Education (CTE) Explorations program to focus on students in grades 7 and 8. Middle school students are encouraged to find careers that meet their passions, better preparing them to be more career ready/focused when entering the high school track.

