



# Annual Report 2019

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

## A message from our executive director

# Co-creating something amazing with you

Over this past year—my first as executive director of Morningside Center—I’ve gotten a glimpse into schools that I’d never had before.

I’ve seen how, in the communities and schools we serve, there is plenty of inspiration, brilliance, and laughter. But there is also tragedy, most of it with deep systemic roots. The students we work with face challenges ranging from homelessness, poverty, and racism to a legal system that targets people of color and schools that are often crowded and under-resourced. (We learned this fall, in fact, that an astonishing one in ten NYC public school students are homeless.)

It is in this setting that our young people show up for school every day. So do their dedicated teachers. And so do we. In hundreds of schools each year, Morningside Center staff developers partner with educators to make school a kind, supportive, and equitable place.

This work is our passion—our sweet spot. I’ve observed and reflected on this often during my first year at this amazing organization.

Our work in schools takes not only skill, but a big dose of humility, because it isn’t about rescuing anyone or “fixing” anything. We know that it is the school community itself—the students, the teachers, the families—who are the heroes in their schools. And they amaze us every day with their courage and creativity.

But in this difficult environment, they need support. They need a skilled facilitator who can tap their collective strengths and help them find the path forward; they need resources, like our curricula; they need a supportive coach at their side to help them overcome their obstacles and carry on.

Over time, in schools across New York City and beyond, we are able to co-create something quite amazing: A place of safety, belonging, and joy where both young people and adults thrive. And it isn’t just a good feeling. The documented results include a dramatic drop in suspensions, fewer discipline incidents, improved social and emotional skills, and greater academic success, especially for children facing challenges.

What does that kind of school look like? I think of Meyer Levin Middle School in East Flatbush, Brooklyn. The school was in the media repeatedly this fall, first on New York 1 and then on Access Hollywood, because of its engaging practices, its joyful celebration of students’ cultural traditions – and because of the major academic progress it is making. As Principal George Patterson says, the math scores are “going through the roof.”

Patterson and the staff and students of Meyer Levin have been working side by side with our staff developer for three years to incorporate a school-wide program of social and emotional learning, restorative practices, and racial equity. At Meyer Levin, the work takes the form of a morning town hall with dancing, singing, and a fantastic steel drum band; a school-wide commitment to culturally

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Cassie Schwerner (above), with Morningside Center Board Chair, Joyce Dudley





## An amethyst connects us

### A story from a rural district

*Morningside Center has begun a partnership with a small rural school district that is dedicated to incorporating SEL and restorative practices into all its schools—and to ensuring an equitable environment for all students, including the district's growing number of students of color. Marieke van Woerkom, one of the Morningside staff developers who is working in the district, was excited to bring our approaches to these very non-urban schools. She has started working with the K-3 teachers, including to help them integrate our 4Rs curriculum (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution) into their classrooms each week. Marieke writes:*

A second-grade teacher brought tears to my eyes when she shared with me an experience she and her students had with The 4Rs.

The teacher—I'll call her Ann—told me that for the gathering of the weekly lesson from The 4Rs', she had sent a talking piece around the circle of students sitting on the rug, asking them for their thoughts. Only half of them would share when

they received the talking piece. The others passed without speaking.

But after reading *We Are Best Friends*, the book that jumpstarts the 4Rs unit on Feelings, something shifted. Ann sent the talking piece around for students to share their reflections on the book, and this time every child spoke. They talked about a time they lost something or someone, and how it made them feel. There was a lot of sadness in the room. "It was a profound experience," Ann told me. And ever since that circle, she added, "everyone has shared in every gathering!"

Among the students who had not shared up to that point was the single Black student in Ann's class. This second-grader, Ann explained, had also been resistant to getting help from his teachers and to using the tools they'd developed to support him in his learning.

But the day after the circle on loss, something remarkable happened: The student brought Ann a

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# Celebrating Lillian Castro's work—and retirement!



*Lillian Castro, our long-time director of operations, retired in December. Lillian helped to make Morningside Center what it is today—in her own special way! Below, Larry Garvin, our chief financial officer, recounts Lil's arrival at Morningside 23 years ago.*

*"On her first day at Morningside Center, Lillian took over the office, and we all gladly succumbed. She was a whirlwind of questions, challenges, like why do you keep your copier in a closet? Whose mess is that? Let's get it out of here! Yes, now! Come on, come on! We moved furniture around until I had to escape into a bookkeeping ledger. If I*

*learned one thing that day it was that Lillian had to be kept out of the business office!*

*"Lillian, the huge responsibilities you undertook so fearlessly would have overwhelmed anyone else. You eventually managed, and often micromanaged millions of dollars of state, federal and city contracts and countless personalities on multiple job sites. Even so, no job has been too big or too small for you. None too messy or too dicey.*

*"Your talent for quick assessments and even quicker solutions put out a lot of fires and prevented a whole lot more. Lillian, you elevate management to an art form, a constellation of wonderful talents, skills, and rich experience. These are priceless qualities that cannot be matched."*

*Photo: Lillian celebrates her retirement with colleagues who have been key leaders of the PAZ after school programs that Lil worked tirelessly to support. (From left, Bry Kolja, Sully Diaz, Lillian, and Yaritza Hernandez.)*

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competent instruction and restorative practices; and social and emotional learning for every child.

Morningside Center isn't just working to create equitable schools where young people have an opportunity to learn. We're also collaborating with students and educators to gain the skills, the awareness, the tools, the knowledge we need to collectively build a better world – so that young people themselves can work together to overcome

the deep, systemic injustices that lead to violence, fear, racism, and poverty. And we start creating that better world, right here, right now.

I hope you enjoy this overview of our work in 2019. It was an incredible year for all of us at Morningside Center, and now the journey continues. We're excited about the path we're on, and so grateful to be sharing it with you.

**– Cassie Schwerner**

# Seeing the power of circle

## NYC Chancellor visits the Brooklyn Academy of Global Finance



Photo: Jessica Gould/WNYC

*Chancellor Carranza in circle with students.*

New York City Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza felt the power of circle after taking part in one this year at the Brooklyn Academy of Global Finance. The school provides weekly classroom circles for all students, with support from Morningside Center staff developer Marisa Zalabak.

The Chancellor's visit, reported by both WNYC and Brooklyn News 12, highlighted the powerful work this school is doing. After sitting in circle with students and hearing their thoughts, Carranza told reporters: "They've created a safe space where they can express how they're feeling." The impact is measurable, Carranza noted: "The numbers of suspensions...have plummeted at this school because students have a way to talk about and resolve their issues." The school has seen a 63 percent drop in suspensions.

Morningside Center's Marisa Zalabak says that it has been wonderful to work with staff and students at the school. She has been coaching staff over the past year in using restorative circles in their classrooms. "The principal is completely

dedicated to restorative practices and to circles as a school norm," she says.

Teacher Catherine Devine told WNYC and Brooklyn News 12 that circles have improved the climate in her classroom. "I've definitely seen a change. [Students are] more willing to come to me if they are having a problem so that I have fewer outbursts in my classroom."

Chancellor Carranza noted that circles improve students' capacity to focus on academics – and not just by reducing suspensions. "If students are worried with what happened this weekend, it is going to bleed into school. If students aren't mentally focused for academics, it's wasted time. The body may be there, but the mind isn't."

"We're trying to have the mind and the body be focused on the task at hand," a teacher told reporters. "And the way to do it is to be very mindful and very explicit about creating the room for students do that."



# Sharing & spreading the work

We're raising our local and national visibility and connections. Over the past year, we've shared our work through webinars, articles, news stories, blogs, and conferences across the country. We want educators everywhere to benefit from what we are learning. Some highlights:



*Above, Cassie & Tala soar in San Diego.*

San Diego Chicago  
Austin D.C.  
Oslo St. Louis

## Conferences & Webinars

We've deepened our connections with the AFT and other organizations through a series of extremely well-received conference presentations and webinars.

- We facilitated a two-part workshop on "A Brave Community: Groundwork for Sustainable Ways to Address Race and

Racism," at the **AFT Teach Conference** in Washington DC.

- We facilitated a workshop on SEL and racial equity at CASEL's launch of **SEL Exchange** in Chicago.
- We presented a workshop on "Taking on Tough Issues in Your Classroom through Circles & SEL" at the **National Council for the Social Studies** Conference in Austin, Texas.
- We participated in a high level meeting hosted by the **UN Children's Fund** and the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation on "Digital Public Goods" in education in Oslo, Norway.
- We shared our learnings with colleagues at **NoVo Foundation's SEL in Action** gathering in San Diego.
- We hosted our third **AFT webinar** on "Using Classroom Circles to Foster SEL, Build Community, and Support Restorative Practices." It was one of the most popular webinars of the year on AFT's Share My Lesson platform.

## Articles & Media Reports

We've also raised our media visibility over the past year. Articles include:

- **Chalkbeat:** "My teachers mispronounced my name. Decades later, it still stings — and influences the way I coach educators"
- **Hechinger Report:** "When it comes to raising school achievement, is love in the mix?" The piece was promoted by the National Association of School Psychologists and was included in a SmartBrief roundup of articles "most read by educators."
- **Lilith Magazine:** "Restorative Justice in the Classroom: An Interview with Cassie Schwerner"
- **Hechinger Report:** "Punitive discipline makes school feel like a prison, not a community"



*Daniel Coles & Marieke van Woerkom shine at the AFT conference in Washington, DC.*

In addition, we've seen media reports about the impact of our restorative, SEL, and racial equity work in schools, including wonderful progress at Meyer Levin, an i3 school (see our story on i3 on page 8). Stories about that school aired on NY 1 TV and WNYC radio. Access Hollywood did a

segment on the school and also interviewed our staff developer Dionne Grayman.

Our restorative circles work was also spotlighted in segments about the Brooklyn Academy of Global Finance on WNYC radio and News 12 TV.

## Programs



Worked with 613 schools



30,046 students reached



4,378 teachers trained

## Website & Communications



Website users increased by 34%



Website pageviews increased by 22%



Newsletter subscribers increased by 27%

# Investing in Innovation: Testing an ambitious plan for school change



A few years ago, Morningside Center staff recognized that we were in a unique position to tackle one of the most difficult challenges facing the U.S. education system: racial disproportionality in discipline.

In schools across the country, Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students – and that tragic reality drives the school-to-prison pipeline.

We realized that our longstanding focus on building relationships and on fostering social and emotional learning and bias awareness in both young people and adults complements and helps set the stage for explicit conversations on race with school staff—conversations that could lead to fewer suspensions and more equitable classrooms and schools. We saw that by combining SEL, restorative practices (including conflict resolution), and a focus on racial equity, we might just be able to “crack the nut” of racial disparities in discipline. In the process, we could help schools become more kind, caring, and just.

In 2016, we received a four-year, federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to create a model for “Whole School Racial Equity” and test it in NYC public schools, in collaboration with researchers from Rutgers University and with critical support from the Einhorn Family Charitable Trust.

We are now in the second phase of this 4-year grant, which involves a close partnership with nine public schools (elementary, middle and high schools) in Brooklyn’s District 19. Tala Manassah, Deputy Executive Director, and the project’s leader says:

*The Whole School Racial Equity project is giving us the resources we need not just to crack a single pernicious problem in education, but also to innovate and substantially deepen all of Morningside Center’s work, and to help us chart what that work should be in this new decade.*

*Schools should be places where children’s natural curiosity is nurtured and protected. They should be places where the inherent love of learning that each young mind has can blossom, and where the development of children’s minds, bodies, emotions, and personhood brings and reinforces the inherent joy of learning by affirming each child’s specialness and worth.*

*We recognize that to accomplish this we need a well-coordinated and multi-faceted toolkit that considers and integrates history, pedagogy, trauma, culturally sustaining practices, self and community care practices, and concrete strategies for developing and sustaining relational trust.*

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**Photos: Peer leaders at Cypress Hills Collegiate Preparatory School (above) plan and facilitate circles for younger students.**

*We are piloting a model that integrates aspects of all of these crucial tools, which we will then share with the field. The project has been transformational for our organization, and I believe that as we keep developing the approach, it will also have positive impact that goes beyond us—our project is part of a movement.*

Each participating school has direct and ongoing support from two Morningside Center staff people: a staff developer and a principal coach (a retired principal). In each school, our staff developer is supporting the overall implementation of the project, working with the school leadership team and school staff to help plan the effort and provide direct training and support.

As our staff developers and principal coaches support schools in integrating our Whole School Racial Equity model from top to bottom, Dr. Anne Gregory of Rutgers University and her team are conducting a randomized control trial that will assess the impact of the project on these nine schools compared to nine control schools.

The work is exciting, intense, and challenging. We are learning and improving the model as we go based on the insights and experiences of our team of i3 staff developers, who meet every two weeks with Tala and other Morningside staff. A key learning this past year: Educators need more direct, practical support early on in incorporating equitable practices into their classrooms—everything from welcoming

students by name and calling on them randomly to connecting course content to students' lives.

Every i3 school has its own story. For instance, at Cypress Hills Collegiate Preparatory High School (whose students are pictured on these pages), students themselves are leading the way, with training and support from our staff developer Lauren Neidhardt.

Every Wednesday, two or three “peer leaders” (juniors and seniors) facilitate circles for students throughout the school. In a recent freshman circle, peer leaders planned and co-facilitated a session in which students shared their feelings about the stress they are under academically and their strategies for handling it.

Circles have also helped strengthen relationships between students and their teachers. As trust has deepened, Lauren has watched teachers increasingly open up to students' ideas and initiatives.

The student circle-keepers came up with the idea of having a monthly lunch together (structured as a community-building circle) to support each other in their work. “They feel empowered,” says Lauren.

“Youth leadership is key to the vision of our Whole School Racial Equity approach,” says Tala. “We want young people to take what they are learning out into the world—and help make it a more equitable, just, and joyful place.”

At our PAZ After-School Program at Brooklyn's PS 24, students spent the fall focused on climate change. Each group picked a topic to research - everything from oil spills to vertical forests to water filtration - and created projects around them.

One kindergarten class decided to tackle our overuse of plastic by upcycling old t-shirts to make beautifully decorated, reusable shopping bags!



*Amethyst, continued from page 3*

big chunk of amethyst. He had chipped off smaller pieces for the other students in his class to keep in their desks "so we can always be connected," he explained. He asked Ann if the class could use the amethyst as their talking piece during 4Rs time going forward. He was eager for the sharing and connection in their classroom circle to continue and deepen.

Ann told me that as they've moved further into The 4Rs, her students have also been able to dig deeper into classroom social dynamics. Instead of simply saying "sorry" when faced with a conflict or other challenging situation, children are now more willing

to be vulnerable and talk about why a problem happened and what the impact of their actions was. What's more, Ann says, her students are more accepting of their classmates' negative behaviors because they're better able to understand the reasons why people do the things they do.

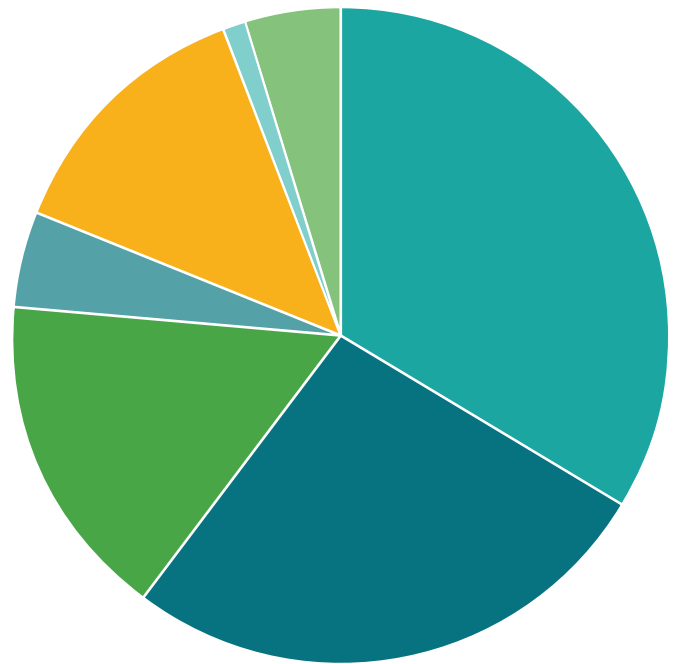
Meanwhile, the only Black student in Ann's class is more open to his teachers and the tools that help him with his schoolwork. He is making academic progress. He frequently asks Ann when the next 4Rs lesson will be. He lights up when Ann has her students circle up on the rug, now with the amethyst as their talking piece.



# Operating budget FY 2019

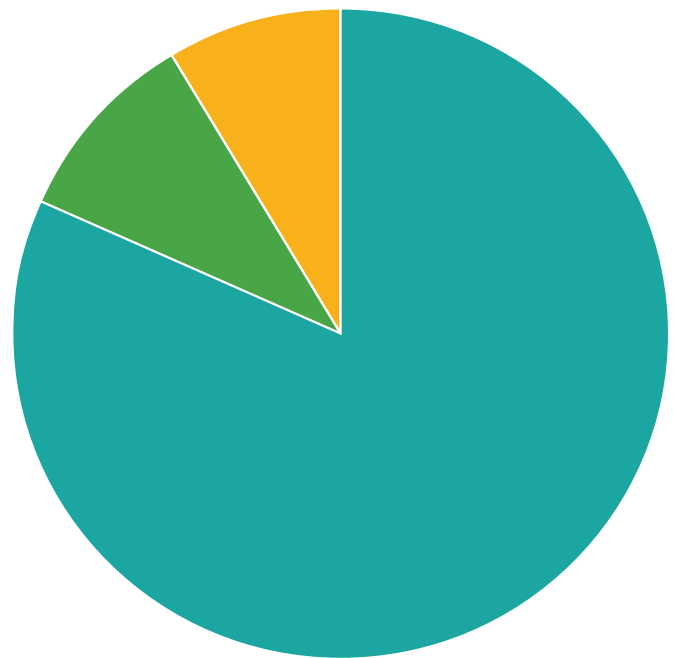
## Budget:

NYC Department of Education	1,800,860
After-School Programs	1,424,574
Federal Contracts	873,656
Other Contracts	243,669
Foundations & Corporations	702,551
Individual Donations	59,575
Learning Kits Orders & Other	242,743
<b>Total Revenue:</b>	<b>5,347,628</b>



## Expenses:

Personnel Services	4,227,601
Direct Program Expenses OTPS	495,162
General & Administrative OTPS	441,470
<b>Total Expenses:</b>	<b>5,164,233</b>
<b>Surplus:</b>	<b>183,395</b>



# Our staff

Sara Carrero, Communications Associate  
Lillian Castro, Director of Operations  
Daniel Coles, Senior Program Manager  
Katrena Dennard, Controller  
Leslie Dennis, Program Associate  
Sully Diaz, Program Manager  
Larry Garvin, Chief Financial Officer  
Maria Fuentes, PAZ Program Director  
Yaritza Hernandez, PAZ Program Manager  
Bryanna Kolja, PAZ Program Director  
Doris Lo, Program Associate  
Tala Manassah, Deputy Executive Director  
Ann Mathews, Human Resources Director  
Laura McClure, Director of Fundraising & Communications  
Cassie Schwerner, Executive Director  
Joseph Yabyabin, Human Resources Assistant  
Cecilia Xu, Finance Assistant









# Our staff developers

Eugenia Acuna  
Mamzelle Adolphine  
Hanaa Arafat  
Lili Arkin  
Elana Bell  
Jonah Braverman  
Victoria Cheng-Gorini  
Ava Daniel  
Nelly Espina  
Amy Fabrikant  
Emily Feinstein  
Ellen Ferrin  
Edwin Figueroa  
Lulu Fogarty  
Javier Francisco Diaz  
Mariana Gaston  
Makeda Gershenson  
Emma Gonzalez

Dionne Grayman  
Joyce Griffen  
Adriana Guzman  
Iris Laurencio  
Ife Lenard  
Janice Marie Johnson  
Ileana Mendez Penate  
Lauren Neidhardt  
Angela Polite  
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Nicole Smith  
Laurine Towler  
Marieke van Woerkom  
Nabil Vinas  
Elizabeth Young  
Marisa Zalabak





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**Morningside Center**

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