

Introduction and Welcome

Welcome, educators, to this guide and toolkit for making your school more equitable and joyful for all students – and adults.

This guide is a gift, an offering to our community of our learnings from an amazing project we were able to undertake over the past five years.

In 2016, we had the good luck of receiving a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to develop and test, in collaboration with schools and researchers, a model for achieving “Whole School Racial Equity.” The aim: to boost students' social and emotional skills, build school communities based on collaboration and mutual respect, and eliminate the disproportional targeting of Black, Latino, and LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities, for punitive discipline.

The model builds on work that Morningside Center has been doing for decades in hundreds of preK-12 schools each year, in partnership with the NYC Department of Education. The strategies and curricula we developed have been shown to strengthen the classroom community, increase the social and emotional skills and well-being of young people and adults, and reduce suspensions and the events that lead-up to them.

Through the i3 grant, Morningside Center partnered with 12 NYC public schools (four elementary, four middle, and four high) and with leading researchers to implement, enrich, and study this model for school change. Dr. Anne Gregory of Rutgers University led a team of researchers in assessing the impact of the project on nine of the schools. That assessment is still underway.

In the course of the project, we and our i3 school partners were able not only to test the strategies that were part of our original model, but develop new strategies and materials aimed especially at increasing racial awareness and reducing racial disparities in discipline. We were able to go deep, and to learn from our experiences. In frequent, eye-opening gatherings of practitioners and researchers, we reflected on what worked, what didn't work, and what we should do next. It was an incredible opportunity for learning.

Fortunately, a key outcome of the project was to share what we learned by creating and distributing a wide range of practical tools and strategies to support schools across the country. Hence, this guide. We are so excited to share some of what we've learned with you!

It's important to note that through the i3 grant, Morningside's team was able to provide extensive training and coaching for the principals, teachers, staff, and sometimes students and parents at participating schools. We wish that we could provide such support for every school that is using this guide. Without it, schools will not be able to faithfully replicate the process we undertook in the Whole School Racial Equity Project. Some of the sessions and materials that we developed require the scaffolding of training and coaching, and may even cause harm without that professional development.

But we want to share the fruits of this project with schools that don't have the resources to pay for this training and coaching. So in this document, we offer guidelines and PD plans that we believe can be successfully implemented without such support. We invite and encourage schools that want to dive deeper into this work to contact us to explore additional support. An outside facilitator can be helpful not only because they may have additional skills and knowledge, but because they aren't under the same pressures and aren't part of the same school culture as the staff members who are so courageously entering into this path.

Doing this work does take courage, and it involves taking risks. It means creating spaces where we may all feel vulnerable. But we all deserve the opportunity to learn, to make mistakes, then try again – to examine what we're doing and how we're doing it, and consider new approaches.

This guide is an invitation for adults to step into being the best version of themselves that they can be – because our kids deserve that. We can and must be the ones to lead this work. If we each start where we are and engage in a conscious and collective effort, we will make progress. And ultimately we will lighten the burden on our students *and* ourselves – and all of us will find more opportunities for joy at school.

We are offering up this guide at a moment when our profession is in crisis. Educators are leaving their jobs. Many are feeling underappreciated. Many even say they feel “disposable.”

So now is a time when we need to create space to talk with each other, to share of ourselves, and to learn from each other. It's the only way for us to climb out of the hole we find ourselves in.

We are aware that teachers, principals, and every other member of the school community is pressed to the limits. We've tried to respect this time pressure by designing this guide

to include sessions that take only about an hour. We are calculating that schools will have two sessions every four to six weeks or so.

But we also want you to know that amid all the workshops and coaching sessions and debriefs involved in the i3 project, we noticed that there was a bit of stardust in it, a bit of magic. It was the magic of time. It emerged from the many hours our teams spent together, in circle-inspired gatherings like the ones embedded in this guide. We took the time to talk about what had happened in our schools. We talked about what we were noticing, what changed, what we learned that we could do, what we wanted to try. We celebrated each other's successes and soothed each other's pain when things didn't work the way we'd hoped.

Time is the one resource that we can never get back. And in schools, where there is never enough time for anything, one of our biggest acts of resistance – and of love – is to give ourselves time. Time to see and honor our own humanity and the humanity of others.

Our fairy dust is in fact backed up by social science research. Human connection, a sense of belonging, relationships, community – these are the things that most powerfully improve the quality of our lives and even the duration of our lives, as well as our capacity to learn. These are the things we and our students need to thrive.

As you and your colleagues travel down this path, we hope you will take the time to be in touch with us. We want to hear your stories. We want to hear how your sessions went, what you learned, what worked and what didn't. And if we can provide any support or guidance to help you on your way, we will.

Thank you for all that you do.

In solidarity and admiration,

Tala Jamal Manassah
Deputy Executive Director
I3 Project Director
Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility
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