



Annual Report 2024

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

A message from Executive Director Cassie Schwerner

Offering Real Space for Parents & Caregivers

I recently was lucky enough to visit the wonderful city of New Orleans. Along with long sun-filled walks and watching a Krewe parade, a true highlight was our visit to StudioBE—a landmark and cultural destination in New Orleans, an "alchemical" space for artists and the local community that inspires them.

The enormous murals of everyday Black members of the NOLA community, nested among portraits of so many of the heroic leaders of the 1960s civil rights movement, were a powerful reminder of the importance of both remembering our history and taking actions for justice in our present-day lives.

As I was wandering through the exhibit, deep in thought, I was pulled out of my engagement by the voices of 25 or so school children on a field trip. This group of mostly white second and third graders seemed to be in awe of both the beauty of art and these larger-than-life figures.

At that moment I was transfixed, watching the African American museum guides engage these little people in a critical history lesson—asking questions about Dr. King's Dream

and for the definitions of big words like "ephemeral" and "eternal" (the title of the exhibit).

My heart was full. The power of learning about diverse histories and cultures and building knowledge across difference was palpable. And I was so proud that, at Morningside, we are focused on this truth of our mutual humanity.

In fact, Morningside Center's mission of fostering joyful, equitable and rigorous learning environments would be impossible without the vital participation and contributions of our young people's caregivers and families, who come from every culture and tradition around the world. We deeply believe in the power of school-family relationships as a key ingredient in children's growth and development. For children to thrive, all of the adults in their lives need opportunities for skill-building, reflection, healing and joy.

In this time of escalating confusion and frequent calamity, caregivers and their children may feel overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated, or fearful of navigating our current world. They may feel a host of other emotions as well, which vary from one moment to the next. Our culturally affirming family workshop series takes time to check in with families, invites them to share how they're feeling, and then communally validates the wide range



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Front page photo: Staff Developer Lauren Neidhardt and Executive Assistant Victoria Iglesias Nieves

Photos above: Cassie Schwerner, Executive Director (top right,) exhibit in StudioBE (bottom left)

The Transformative Power of Circles

Interview of Staff Developer Iris Laurencio with Mariah Schwarz

Circles are a container for so much that Morningside Center does. From my first day as the new writer at Morningside, it was clear that they are foundational to our work, but as someone who had never been in a Circle I really needed to know: [exactly what is a Circle?](#) And why are they so foundational? Thus began my journey to learn how Morningside practices, teaches and continues to improve how we facilitate Circles across SEL, restorative practices and racial equity.

I began by experiencing how we teach educators about Circles through our 5-day Tier 1 DOE training this past summer. I and the others in my cohort were guided by Staff Developer, Iris Laurencio. I was thrilled to be among more than 740 educators trained in summer 2024 alone.

Following the training, I interviewed Iris, and two teachers who participated in my cohort—both of whom were already using Circles in their classes, just 11 days into the school year. I wanted to hear a variety of experiences. And share them with you.

Circles are a process for gathering any group of people to build community by mutually getting to know one another through sharing. Circles begin with an opening ceremony; are followed by sharing on prompts or other activities—using a talking piece to preserve voice and attention (only the person with the talking piece speaks); and conclude with a closing ceremony. Morningside trains Circle-keepers how to hold and keep safe these Circles so that meaningful sharing can facilitate each individual getting to know and be known by others. We provide training, coaching and curricula in holding Circles that nurture community, care and belonging. At MSC we often say, “it’s not therapy but it is therapeutic.”

While the steps and skeleton of Circles may

look or feel here deceptively simple, having experienced the training myself for five hours per day for a full week, I am here to bear witness that the only thing I could compare to that time was the few months after my son was born: “time out of time,” when I was intensely



bonding with my child in a safe and cocooned space. Sacred.

Thus, we invite you to travel with us on a deeper exploration of Circles with Iris to begin to answer *What is a Circle?*

Iris, how did you get started facilitating Circles?

I started doing Circles without knowing I was doing Circles. By Christmas break of my first year teaching, four teachers had quit and I was brought in as the fifth Spanish teacher. I was ready to take on the world. And the reality of teaching was nothing like I had expected or read about or studied about or seen during my student teaching. Nothing had prepared me for the classroom.

So, it was chaos—I didn't teach anything. Lessons were spent trying to just control the classroom and manage the students. And I just

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Photo: (left to right) Tier 1 training participant) and Staff Developer Iris Laurencio

4Rs Expansion Project

In fall 2023, Lisa Goodson—a former Brooklyn principal who now leads an NYC Department of Education program to integrate social and emotional learning (SEL) with academics—reached out to us.

We first met Lisa several years ago, when, as principal of Brooklyn’s Fresh Creek School, she led her school’s participation in Morningside Center’s Investing in Innovation (i3) project, an ambitious, federally funded research program to foster SEL and racial equity in schools. Together we worked to implement our literacy-based SEL program, [The 4Rs \(Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution\)](#), into her school. In her new role supporting 600 schools across the city, she wanted to explore another collaboration to bring this powerful program to more schools.

She explained:

I wanted to partner with an organization that was strongly aligned with my core values and our approach to SEL and restorative practices, and I also know that Morningside has a third



strand around racial equity. I found out that Morningside has a hand in so much of the work across the city—and has a great reputation and data to support it.

We soon launched a pilot project involving 12 elementary schools that span the city. Before work began, leaders from these schools came together to learn more about The 4Rs and share their ideas and proposals, helping to shape the program.

As Morningside deputy executive director Tala Manassah points out, The 4Rs “challenges the binary between the life of the mind and the life of the heart and spirit. There’s a third way—an SEL that insists that we need opportunities to learn in a way that meets the needs of every child.”

In 2024—its second year—this program grew to 18 schools, and is thriving! Participants, Lisa says, have “rallied around the idea of teaching the whole child. And that we need to create a space for adult learners to dig deep inside themselves—to lead from the inside out.” ♦



Top photo: (from left) Tala Manassah, Deputy Executive Director with 4Rs participating school principals Nekia Wise, Camille Jacobs, & Lisa Goodson. **Bottom photo:** Morningside Program participants

SEL & Equity in After-School

Our After-School team has also done incredible work this year locally in NYC and nationally at conferences and beyond supporting vital after-school providers. Our workshops, training and coaching, and presentations help providers center social-emotional learning and equity, in some cases for those in SEL and equity service deserts.

In Directors Bryanna Kolja's and Sully Diaz's words: "Does your organization hold food and clothing drives for low-income families or offer activities during out-of-school "snack time" that respect Muslim students who are fasting during Ramadan? There are so many ways programs can center equity. It just requires time to truly get to know your youth and their families." ♦



Top right photo: (from left) Sully Diaz, Director of Program Operations, and Bryanna Kolja, After-School Supervisor/ Program Coordinator. **Top left & bottom photos:** Morningside Program participants

had this moment where—it was even just for my own mental health, “I need to do something different, because what I’m doing now is not working. They are obviously not interested in conjugating or learning words in Spanish.” So, I



literally had the class sit on the floor and I just asked them questions about their lives.

I knew one thing: that teenagers, they are interested in themselves. One thing that people care about is talking about themselves on some level. And, so, I just literally had them sit in a circle, and started asking them questions about just pretty shallow things, about family, "do you have siblings," "what kind of pizza do you like,

what are you looking forward to this weekend?"

This is something that came naturally to me, to sit together and get to know each other, and I knew that saying, "people don't care what you know until they know you care," I knew that was true. And I guess I was going to put it to the test. And I did care. I did care about these people in my class! I was just authentic and genuine in my curiosity about them.

And, slowly—very, very slowly but surely—things started to shift in the classroom: they would circle up by themselves! I started to take what I was learning about them in the Circles into worksheets and Spanish lessons. And then the Spanish lessons were interesting to them because it was about them. That’s how I ended up bringing in the academic portion. But first I had to get to know them.

But I didn't know that I was doing a 'thing' until I came into Morningside Center. When I first started with MSC, I was very scripted. I wanted to hit all the learning objectives and goals. Then as I got comfortable with the material and myself, I was like, "wait a second, I've been doing this for over 20 years, since the beginning of my career as an educator!"

Now, as a facilitator I still have our goals and objectives in mind, but I feel more attuned to the group and dynamics. I let myself be led by what's happening and what the group needs.

How do you think you came to this natural way with Circles?

I actually had a close group of neighborhood friends (in elementary and middle school), and when we would get into conflict, we would say “we need to circle up,” and then “this is what’s bothering us.” We sat in a circle and talked it out. So, it’s a way of being that comes naturally to me, that is so human.

What do you notice people really respond to in a Tier I training?

***The cultural share—people will really go far!
Some people bring in food, some people dress***

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Photo: Morningside Center circle centerpiece

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up, or bring in big works, works of art! I love to see people proud of their culture! And then I like to do a round of connections where people share what they connected to during the culture share. Leaving room for connections is beautiful because you get to see two people from what you think are opposite cultures say “yeah, me too,” and connect—I love to see that!

I also like to do the Circle of appreciation. People like that, they see that someone notices what they contributed.

And what do participants seem to need the most?

They come in with so much overwhelm. Students are dealing with so much and there

is so little that teachers can do in the face of it all. But I think just witnessing our students is important; seeing that they are good, wise and powerful. That something is enough, that is power! And participants seeing that transforms it.

We create a container for teachers to be seen and heard: Circles! It's not therapy, but we are creating a space to make a student know that they matter and their story matters! That's what Circles are—creating a space for people to be seen! So, you have to allow yourself to be seen too, you have to be a clear mirror and real presence so students know they are seen.

Witnessing is a sacred act. Not having the need to change anyone but just witness. ♦



Photo: (from center) Daniel Alexander-Coles, Senior Program Manager (red shirt, beige hat) sitting in circle with school participants

Grief & Loss: Other Ways Morningside Supports

By Cassie Schwerner

This year I want to offer you something a little different: a tangible story of the invaluable and transformative work that we do in schools every day. Thanks to Morningside Center's ongoing work on social emotional learning and restorative practices, there are some fifth graders in New York City who have forever changed how they process loss and grief—and in the process, are more connected to each other and their school community.

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a means by which we can develop necessary skill sets such as mindfulness, empathy and the ability to work with our emotions. If you're a fifth grader, though, and one of your classmates dies, how are you supposed to process that? How might social emotional learning provide some help? How might SEL also support the adults in the building?

Tragically, that's what happened earlier this year in one school in which we work. Having been sick for a while already, a fifth grader attended school briefly at the start of the school year, then never returned. His classmates and teachers learned a few months later the devastating news that he had passed away. This child was well-loved among his classmates and teachers. Difficult emotions of loss, fear, confusion, and sadness ran high throughout the school.

Fortunately, a Morningside's Staff Developer was working in the school at the time. The school's leadership asked the Staff Developer if she could help organize and lead a Circle for all forty of the school's fifth graders, and the staff who'd known the child. She did so the very next day.



To start, the school counselor brought in a poem called "Remember Me," which she read to open the Circle as she mentioned the student who had passed. Next, the Staff Developer (I would normally share the name, but we need to keep this story anonymous), led the fifth graders in a grounding exercise. She introduced a talking piece and invited the students to talk about how they felt—what emotions were coming up for them in that moment.

Most of those initial responses were brief, halting, as the students struggled to put their emotions into words, responding simply, "sad," "confused" or "I'm not really sure." Some sat quietly crying as they passed the talking piece to their neighbor.

The Staff Developer explained that it can be helpful to honor people who we have loved and lost, and that one way to do this is to share our memories of that person. She sent the talking piece around the Circle again, inviting each student to share a memory of their classmate. She was struck that every single child did have a genuine memory to share, everything from "he was a good artist" to "remember that time when we were playing soccer, and he kicked the ball so high?"

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Photo: Tier 1 training participants' hands connected by purple yarn above a circle centerpiece

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Around and around the Circle the memories flew, until finally the Staff Developer explained that it's important to keep saying the name of the person we have lost. She invited everyone in the Circle to stand up, place their hands in the Circle and lift them up in unison as together they said his name. The Staff Developer explained, "as we say his name, we lift him up and carry forth his memory."

"Something happened in that moment," the Staff Developer told me later, "the way they said his name, the way they lifted him up—it was a moment of real connection and healing."

I share this story with you as our community and supporters because so often the public wisdom that surrounds debates on education focuses just on academic results and school accountability. But we know that there are many

things that can interrupt academic success. Is a student hungry? Is there abuse in the home? Is there an undiagnosed disability?

I share this story because it is an example of how a thoughtful, affirming group activity that shepherds young people through grief and loss can have a lasting effect. My hunch is that the students in this fifth grade will be forever changed by our wonderful Staff Developer's intervention that day—they will feel more tightly connected to their school, their classmates and their own deepest feelings. Thank you for standing with us and allowing transformative moments such as this to occur throughout the city, in ways that don't necessarily get recorded on test scores or appear on the nightly news. These experiences are the ones that shape our lives. ♦

Thank you, Board of Directors!

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Photo: Board members engaged in an activity during a board meeting.

FY 2024 Year In Review

Revenue:

NYC Department of Education	\$1,803,028.50
After-School Programs	\$573,967.96
Other Contracts	\$249,719.50
Foundations & Corporations	\$3,965,928
Individual Donations	\$45,855.78
Learning Kits & Other Revenue	\$81,210.00

Total Revenue: \$6,744,076.38

Expenses:

Personnel Services	\$4,533,258.70
Direct Program Expenses	\$537,457.00
General & Administrative OTPS	\$206,120.62
Total Expenses:	\$5,276,836.32



2,840 Educators Reached

142 Training Cohorts

374 Curriculum Kits Provided

12 Parent Workshops Delivered

Estimated 45,440 Students Reached



63% Increase in Website Users

8,000+ Newsletter Subscribers

20 New TeachableMoment Lessons

Our First Merch Campaign!

What's New

Morningside Center has been dedicated to whole-school transformation in Harlem's Community School District 5 for three years. Many thanks to our partners who make this work possible: D5 Superintendent and deputy Superintendent, Dr. Shawn Davenport and Dr. Dawn DeCosta, New York Community Trust, Trinity Church Philanthropies, Harlem Renaissance Education Pipeline and Abyssinian Development Corporation.

In 2024 this deep district-wide effort and its impact were affirmed and expanded with funding from the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and New York's City Council to also serve District 6, Washington Heights and Inwood in Northern Manhattan. A very special shout-out to Council Member Carmen De LaRosa and her remarkable team! Thanks to these wonderful funders and partnerships, Morningside is now building community, fostering social and emotional skills, and advancing equity in public schools, after-school programs and local Community-based Organizations to nurture sustainable change

that also cares for the vital caretakers. When a whole region can grow supportive networks for deep work, sustainable transformation becomes a reality.

Additionally, the [Keith & Miller Foundation seeded the Charles Lawrence Keith and Clara Miller Training & Support Fund](#) at Morningside, which empowers us to care for our Staff Developers (SDs)—the frontline workers of our organization who are in schools supporting communities every day across the NYC DOE and beyond. With additional training, coaching and gathering, our SDs deepen impact every day.

Finally, Morningside was honored to receive generous funding from [Yield Giving](#) for precious unrestricted operating funds that support every aspect of our work—this coveted nationally recognized award champions our incredible impact on the educators, learners, schools and families we have supported for more than 40 years! ♦



Photos: Morningside Program participants

of emotions we're all experiencing during this time. By reflecting on and identifying the ways in which they are activated, caregivers draw connections between their emotional states and those of their children, gaining new and enlightened perspectives that result in a commitment to wholeheartedly listen to their children.



With this in mind, Morningside created a series of workshops to support families in knowing and caring for themselves to better support and care for their children. These workshops are designed to be delivered either in person or virtually. Each format has its own advantages. We have been gratified to see how many parents and caregivers have participated in this first year of offerings. By the end of the school year we will have worked with more than 2,000 participants:

On a weekday evening, 130-plus caregivers sign on to Zoom to be in community with other families and explore the topics most relevant to their children's lives (e.g., conflict resolution, social and emotional learning, how young people process and identify their emotions, and more). Some are on camera,

raising a hand emoji to share reflections on messages received from their caregivers as children, experiencing a-ha moments around how these messages seep into their current parenting practices. Others are off-camera due to caretaking or dinnertime routines but share connections and helpful advice in the chat box. One participant is driving home from work and pulls off the road to unmute herself and respond directly to another parent who is having trouble communicating with his adolescent daughter. Several interpreters are on the line, presenting the facilitator's information in Spanish, Mandarin and Bengali. By the close of the workshop, there is a chorus of voices, both audible and within the chat, exclaiming the same refrain with gratitude: "We are not alone."

These family workshops afford parents and caregivers a brave and welcoming space to acknowledge their daily stressors, process their personal experiences with the topic at hand, and affirm one another in the challenging but critical role they play in their children's lives. Hearing the struggles and rewarding moments of other families builds a strong caregiving community rooted in mutual understanding and appreciation. One caregiver, for example, reminded her fellow participants, "We have to treat [our children] with respect—as little humans with unique souls."

Just as the heroes of the past can take on larger-than-life meaning and power for those of us who do not live such big, public lives—parents can feel to children larger than life, powerful, all-knowing and even omnipotent. By rooting in our common humanity with these "little humans with unique souls" and our own truths and vulnerabilities, we both remind ourselves of our children's power and voices, and the power and voices we have to raise them up. This is the work Morningside Center is dedicated to—and empowered to take on—thanks to the affirming support of so many in our community. ♦



Thank you, Supporters!

Anonymous

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... and thank you, individual donors!

Hellos & Goodbyes in 2024

We want to thank Katrena Dennard, Ann Mathews and Laura McClure for their decades of service, dedication and friendship to Morningside! Without Katrena's stellar direction of finance during a period of increased fundraising; Ann's leadership in Human Resources—guiding Morningside through the pandemic and beyond; and Laura's storytelling through grants, articles and insights across communications and fundraising, Morningside could not have had the incredible impact we are all committed to, transforming our schools and our world.

All of us at Morningside were delighted to welcome two new staff members in 2024: Asja Culpepper and Mariah Schwarz! Asja manages Human Resources capacities and brings much more to our community while Mariah holds fundraising and communications down with Sara and Cassie. Morningside is an ever-evolving community that is dedicated to building on the offerings of the past while integrating new energies every day. ♦



Top photo: Morningside Program participants. **Bottom Photos:** Laura McClure, retired Fundraising Director (left), Ann Mathews, Human Resources Director & Katrena Dennard, Director of Finance (middle), Asja Culpepper, Payroll & HR Manager; Mariah Schwarz, Writer & Editor (right).

Our Staff



Daniel Alexander-Coles, Senior Program Manager

Sara Carrero, Communications Specialist

Asja Culpepper, Payroll & HR Manager

Sully Diaz, Director of Program Operations

Dionne Grayman, Director of Strategic Partnerships

Lilith Hedrington, Payroll Specialist

Yaritza Hernandez, Contracts Manager

Kriston Huggins-Daniel, Data Processing Coordinator

Victoria Iglesias Nieves, Executive Assistant

Bryanna Kolja, Afterschool Supervisor/Program Coordinator

Jillian Luft, Curriculum Writer & Editor

Tala Manassah, Deputy Executive Director

Marisol Mendez, PAZ Program Director

Edgardo Rivera, Senior Director of Operations and Finance

Demetria Robinson, Program and Operations Associate

Mariah Schwarz, Grant Writer

Cassie Schwerner, Executive Director

Joseph Yabyabin, HR Generalist

Cecilia Xu, Staff Accountant



Our Staff Developers

Eugenia Acuña
Mamzelle Adolphine
Lili Arkin
Jonah Braverman
Victoria Cheng-Gorini
Ava Daniel
Tresa Elguera
Nelly Espina
Amy Fabrikant
Emily Feinstein
Ellen Ferrin
Rusa Ann Fischer
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Mariel Lemair
Taryn Matusik
Beata Moon
Lauren Neidhardt
Angela Polite
DaRon Ross
Jenny Seaquist
Nicole Lavonne Smith-Johnson
Pablo Torres
Laurine Towler
Marieke van Woerkom
Nabil Viñas
Elizabeth Miu-Lan Young
Marisa Zalabak





Photo: (left to right) Staff Developers Marieke van Woerkom, Elizabeth Miu-Lan Young, Laurine Towler, Ava Daniel, Beata Moon, & Rusa Ann Fischer with Daniel Alexander-Coles, Senior Program Manager

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