A Philly School's Big Bet on Non-Violence
by Jeff Deeney

In a desperately poor, dangerous part of town, Memphis Street Academy decided to ditch its metal detectors and focus on supporting students. Violence dropped by 90 percent.

A view of a street in the Kensington neighborhood of North Philadelphia in 1998. John Paul Jones Middle School, now Memphis Street Academy, draws students from a desperately poor and dangerous section of the city. (Dan Loh/AP)

Last year when American Paradigm Schools took over Philadelphia's infamous, failing John Paul Jones Middle School, they did something a lot of people would find inconceivable. The school was known as "Jones Jail" for its reputation of violence and disorder, and because the building physically resembled a youth correctional facility. Situated in the Kensington section of the city, it drew students from the heart of a desperately poor hub of injection drug users and street level prostitution where gun violence rates are off the charts. But rather than beef up the already heavy security to ensure safety and restore order, American Paradigm stripped it away. During renovations, they removed the metal detectors and barred windows.

The police predicted chaos. But instead, new numbers seem to show that in a single year, the number of serious incidents fell by 90%.

The school says it wasn't just the humanizing physical makeover of the facility that helped. Memphis Street Academy also credits the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), a noncoercive, nonviolent conflict resolution regimen originally used in prison settings that was later adapted to violent schools. AVP, when tailored to school settings, emphasizes student empowerment, relationship building and anger management over institutional control and surveillance. There are no aggressive security guards in schools using the AVP model; instead they have engagement coaches, who provide support, encouragement, and a sense of safety.

The size and immediacy of the drop will strike some as suspect, but Memphis Street Academy stands by accuracy of their numbers, saying that they are required by law to report the same types of incidents any other school must report. Nothing about the reporting process or the kinds of incidents that must be reported was changed. And while many charter schools are criticized for "creaming," i.e. taking only the best students and transferring those with behavior problems or disabilities to other struggling public schools, the Memphis Street Academy and the Alternatives to Violence Project insist that wasn't the case, here. The conditions of their charter required them to pick up exactly where John Paul Jones left off.

Carolyn Schodt, a registered nurse at Alternatives to Violence who also runs AVP inside Graterford State Prison, says, "We did this with the same students, same parents, same poverty. In one school year serious incidents - drug sales, weapons, assaults, rapes - went from 138 to 15.

Fifth grade certainly isn't too early for school-based violence intervention programming in North Philadelphia. Memphis Street Academy kids grow up quick. Many students have parents struggling with addiction and older siblings in the drug game who are already either dead or in jail. The reality of life in their community can be harsh; teachers say students coming to school in the morning witness prostitutes on Kensington Avenue tricking to get their wake-up dope shots. On the way home in the afternoon, after the extensive network of drug corners operating in the neighborhood are up and humming, they might have to dodge bullets. Students have brought dirty syringes and discarded guns they found on the street to class. By middle school many of them have witnessed more violence than most Americans who didn't serve in a war ever will.

Previously listed as one of Pennsylvania's persistently dangerous schools, John Paul Jones was known as an unruly place where fights were the norm and street violence from the surrounding neighborhood occasionally spilled onto school property. This despite the fact that security measures at the time--the ones the school got rid of while rebranding to Memphis Street Academy--were extreme.

"Every day ," says CEO of American Paradigm Schools Stacey Cruise, "they would set up a perimeter of police officers on the blocks around the school, and those police were there to protect neighbors from the children, not to protect the children from the neighborhood." Before school let out the block would clear, neighbors coming in off their porches and fearfully shutting their doors. Nearby bodegas would temporarily close shop. When the bell rung, 800 rambunctious children would stream out the building's front doors, climbing over vehicles parked in front of the school in the rush to get away.

School police officers patrolled the building at John Paul Jones, and children were routinely submitted to scans with metal detecting wands. All the windows were covered in metal grating and one room that held computers even had thick iron prison bars on its exterior.

In taking the hugely risky leap to a noncoercive, nonviolence based safety system at Memphis Street Academy, American Paradigm says convincing community stakeholders that these prison-like implements of the security state needed to be discarded wasn't easy.

"The police department told us flat out, 'You're foolish, and you'll regret it,'" says Jerry Santilli, American Paradigm's co-founder. He says that the police department lobbied so hard the school was ultimately convinced not to remove all the window gratings, leaving the rear of the school still enmeshed in metal because the officers informed them of a network of drug houses operating directly across the street.

The school took the grates down from the building façade in an elaborate ceremony, inviting news crews to film a cherry picker crane lifting them off the building. Police brass showed up wearing Kevlar vests, a school administrator said, to make their feelings about the neighborhood clear.

Later that night 12 of the windows got shot out by drug crews.

It didn't change anyone's mind; in fact, it proved an opportunity for Memphis

Street Academy CEO Dr. Christine Borelli, herself a neighborhood native who spent part of her childhood living with her grandmother at Kensington & Somerset, one of the most notorious drug corners in the world, to begin the process of reaching out to the community and building relationships with families. Her willingness to come on the block and get cooperation from distrustful neighbors proved crucial.

"I don't just fit in here, I'm from here. I'm proud to be from here. When I go out to look for a student who's not coming to school I run into people I know. Parents appreciate that you're not fearful of the community."

Many educators have come to question the value of the oppressive security measures that predominate in big urban public schools like Philadelphia's: metal detectors, barred windows, windows that open only a crack ostensibly to keep objects or people from being thrown out of them, and militaristic security staff that roam the hallways demanding documentation from students not in the classroom,

Assaults on students by other students and on teachers and administrators have persisted despite these measures. It raises the question of whether the marginal benefits of the district's security apparatus are worth the psychological impact of creating an environment for children that so closely resembles a correctional facility. The kids at John Paul Jones, who nicknamed their own school the "Jones Jail," were clearly aware that it was the school-to-prison pipeline entrance.

Shaun Harper is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education where he heads the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education. His forthcoming book Exceeding Expectations explores the subject of black and Latino male academic achievement, which he feels is shaped by environmental factors like the physical condition and culture at a particular school.

"Environment matters," says Harper, who interviewed hundreds of low-income New York City public school students for his research on the subject. "If a school promotes academic rigor and going to college, that shapes student behavior. If a school's environment feels unsafe and looks like a prison, then that does, also." None of the kids Harper has ever interviewed who went from a high-security school to a low-security school ever said they felt unsafe without all the bars and metal detectors. Like many educators, he's dubious about the protection these measures actually provide. He cites the story of a hard-working, college-bound student in New York City who accidentally brought to school a box cutter he used on a summer job and forgot to remove from his backpack. For months this student unwittingly carried the box cutter in and out of the school undetected before a security officer finally discovered it. Once the box cutter was discovered, the student was suspended. Did this make the school any safer?

American Paradigm pitched a new way forward on the safety question to AVP, when asking them to come on board as a partner. Rather than aggressive security guards patrolling the hallways, American Paradigm wanted a network of "engagement coaches" whose job is to be continually interacting with children in a supportive instead of punitive role. Engagement coaches were recruited from Troops to Teachers, a program that trains veterans as educators. The vets provide a strong role model presence that makes children feel secure. AVP agreed to also train the engagement coaches in nonviolent conflict resolution, so their job is to help mediate disputes rather than dole out punishment. Since the children trust their engagement coaches, the school is able to get ahead of potential conflicts: coaches often get advance word, for example, when something's about to go down in the hallways.*

Professor Shaun Harper believes even kids who have grown up in violent environments can adapt to a school environment that is more gentle and humane. He explains that in better-performing public schools in New York City, academic achievement can be established as the community norm through small acts like announcing each student's college acceptance over the PA system. "You do this for the 9th graders," Harper explains, "not for the seniors who are getting admitted to college. When I interview 9th graders at better-performing low-income schools about why they want to go to college, they say because that's the expectation the school has for them."

Memphis Street Academy says their own internal student polling reflects Mr Harper's research findings. Allowed to respond anonymously to questionnaires, 73% of students said they now felt safe at school, 100% said they feel there's an adult at school who cares about them and 95% said they hope to graduate from college one day. These are the same Jones Jail kids who 12 months ago were climbing over cars to get away from school (Memphis Street Academy has since staggered dismissals and is using AVP techniques on the grounds as kids leave--nearby bodegas have stopped locking their doors when school lets out).

When asked about the security changes at Memphis Street Academy a ten-year-old fifth-grader sums up her experience: "There are no more fights. There are no more police. That's better for the community."