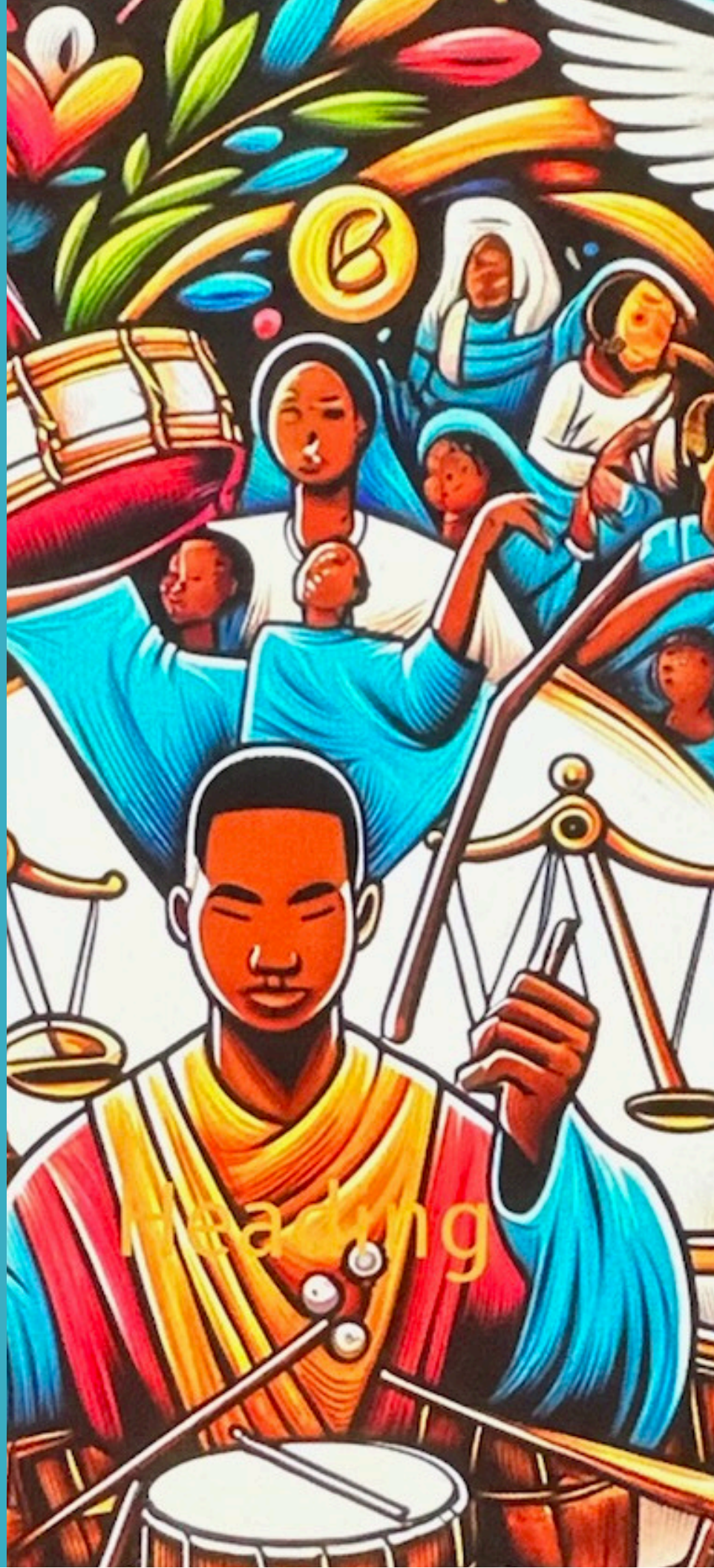


# Massive Resilience Project Evaluation

Drums No Guns Foundation & the  
Institute for Public Health Innovation  
2023-2024



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# Executive Summary

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The evaluation of the Massive Resilience Project (MRP) revealed key recommendations to enhance the program's success, sustainability, and scalability. These insights, drawn from focus groups, staff self-reporting, and on-site observations, emphasize the importance of sustainable funding, data-driven evaluation, structural linkages, and scalability.

## **Sustainable Funding**

A consistent multi-year funding framework is critical to maintain MRP's long-term presence at MLK, in the community, and its impact in the lives of students. Stakeholders stressed that funding fragility could exacerbate existing health equity risks and undermine trust built through recent years of engagement.

## **Baseline Data and Retrospective Study**

The lack of baseline data posed challenges in evaluating MRP's outcomes. Future efforts should prioritize collecting initial metrics to enable comparative longitudinal analysis. A comprehensive evaluation plan should be developed for all programming activities. Additionally, conducting a retrospective cost analysis of MRP's pillars would provide insights into the financial requirements for replicating the program at other sites, ensuring its scalability and feasibility.

## **Structural Linkages**

Building resilient funding mechanisms that transcend political and local, state, and federal administrative changes is essential. While local champions, such as principals and staff, have been pivotal, their presence cannot be guaranteed at other sites. Strengthening connections with state and federal entities and securing early teacher buy-in will broaden MRP's support network, fostering sustainability and faculty alignment with program orientation, goals, and objectives.

## **Prototype Replication**

MRP's prevention model has potential for domestic replication, offering cost-effective alternatives across the complex, societal problems of gun violence, trauma, and community wellness.. Dedicated resources for developing future iterations of the MRP model will ensure its scalability and adaptability.

## **Next Wise Steps**

MRP fosters a "sacred space" where youth develop self-reverence and resilience. Amplifying student voices and capturing their stories in broader forums will enhance awareness of MRP's transformative role. Staff's commitment to "showing up" with hope exemplifies the program's ethos of empowerment. With targeted investments in sustainability, data, and replicability, the Massive Resilience Project can continue equipping youth with the tools and support to achieve their dreams, positioning them—and their communities—for a resilient future.

# Project Background

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## Program Description

The Massive Resilience Project (MRP) is a coalition of community-based organizations working together to address structural drivers of health in Richmond, Virginia schools and communities. Using a targeted approach at Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School (the project site), the MRP employs an Urban Trauma lens coupled with Restorative Justice practices to support the resilience of Black and Brown youth. MRP's goal is to increase school and community resilience against violence, including gun violence, through evidence-based approaches centered on engaging middle-school youth in culturally responsive psychosocial supports.

During the 2023/2024 school year (grant period October 20, 2023 – October 20, 2024), MRP engaged in mindfulness and mentorship programming at MLK, the curation of a school and community garden, coaching in community circle-keeping, culturally responsive mental health training, and a public health campaign promoting non-violence. MRP's stated purpose is to promote health equity among Richmond's emerging generations by investing in learning environments most affected by racialized trauma and gun violence using equity promotion strategies that are innovative and strength-affirming.

## Rationale

Research from the Center for Disease Control ([2024](#)) suggests a correlation between risk factors associated with school and community violence, and negative health outcomes among school youth. In the MLK context, these risk factors include systemic economic disinvestment, high youth homicide rates, racialized school discipline disparities, and community trauma. MLK is in the East End district of Richmond where Census data ([2020](#)) report poverty rates four times the national rate. CBS News ([February, 2022](#)) reported Richmond as the 11th most deadly U.S. city, with homicide rates three times the per capita national average. Richmond's Mayor declared gun violence a public health crisis ([2021](#)) and recent ([2024](#)) reports from the Richmond City Health District verify that homicide is now the leading cause of death among Richmond youth.

For Richmond's schools to be safer and youth life expectancy to rise, investments need to be made in disrupting conditions that feed school and community violence. MRP has delivered on this mandate at the MLK Middle School by curating intentional spaces for social and emotional learning (Sankofa Mindfulness room and community garden), by creating alternatives to school suspension and expulsion (through the use of Restorative Practices, and training in Urban Trauma and Healing Centered Engagement), and by advocacy for system change (through arts-based and community-driven non-violence events and campaigns).

## Key Partners

MRP has integrated into its programming the expertise of a coalition of organizations with recognized experience challenging systemic racism through

# Project Background

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health equity and violence prevention initiatives. The project's five primary partners are the Drums No Guns foundation (implementing partner), MLK Middle School (site), the Institute for Public Health Innovation (fiscal sponsor), the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation (grant funder), and Generative Futures Consulting LLC (evaluators). MRP program participants included the MLK student body, teachers and staff, parents/guardians, local community members, and associated service organizations.

MRP's implementation team is led by Dr. Ram Bhagat (Project Lead and Drums No Guns founder) and team members Danielle Freeman Jefferson, Kiran Bhagat, Leah Reid, Ashley Williams, and Ellis Sawyer. The project's larger stakeholder group includes: Groundwork RVA; Flourish Agenda, Inc., Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth; Urban Trauma; Holistic Life Foundation; Whole School Mindfulness; ART180; Kinfolk Community Network; The Conciliation Project.

# Evaluation

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## Methodology

This evaluation applies a mixed methods approach analyzing quantitative data to assess compliance with project delivery goals, and qualitative data to evaluate project impacts.

Quantitative data used to measure delivery compliance was generated from multiple sources:

- ▶ Training and activity logs (participant attendance tracking)
- ▶ Event records (verification of presentations and trainings conducted)
- ▶ Social influence reach (promotions)
- ▶ Project materials (photos and arts campaign products)

Qualitative data sources used in analyzing project impacts included:

- ▶ Focus group (conducted by evaluators)
- ▶ Event reports (documentation of participant feedback)
- ▶ Meeting and convening notes (information gathered from program staff)

## Assessment Philosophy

The philosophical approach used in this evaluation report is rooted in a Transformative Justice paradigm. This paradigm considers the Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) and how participants' health is impacted by the presence (or absence) of equitable access to health-enabling resources. Values that underpin this health equity approach include:

- ▶ Engaging local stakeholders ("nothing about us without us")
- ▶ Examining root causes (conducting analysis that names system interactions)
- ▶ Considering impacts (being accountable for unintended program effects)
- ▶ Investing in equity (centering justice in program design and implementation)
- ▶ Capacitating long-term advancements (advocating for sustainable growth through multi-year project cycles)

The attention the MRP gives to centering youth, their experiences and their activism, is key to our assessment of the program. Next we turn to identifying specific indicators that help in evaluating MRP's work.

## Goals and Objectives

MRP's stated goals during the grant period were to deliver on the following:

- ▶ Ensure every student at MLK has access to culturally responsive mental health services
- ▶ Increase student, school staff, and community member access to Community Healing Circles
- ▶ Increase student, school staff, and community member access to Community Healing Spaces (urban garden)
- ▶ Increase student involvement in anti-violence activism and awareness activities (Generation Dream Edu-Concert)

# Evaluation

In light of these goals, this report's qualitative analysis focuses on content gathered in response to program impacts, while quantitative analysis assesses program delivery regarding the following 4 program pillars:



## **Pillar 1: Access to Culturally Responsive Mental Health Services**

- To what extent did the school-based Mental Health Team (MHT) receive training?
- What activities were conducted that enabled students to access the Sankofa Mindfulness Room?



## **Pillar 2: Access to Community Healing Circles**

- To what extent did Circle Keepers receive training?
- To what extent did students, school staff, and community members have access to Community Healing Circles?



## **Pillar 3: Access to Community Healing Spaces (urban garden)**

- To what extent did students, and school staff, have access to Community Healing Spaces?
- What activities were conducted that encouraged students to access the urban garden space?



## **Pillar 4: Involvement in anti-violence activism and awareness activities**

- To what extent were students engaged in an arts-based, anti-violence public health campaign?
- To what extent was anti-violence awareness driven through attendance at events addressing gun violence, school violence, community violence, and community healing?

# Evidence-Based Findings

## Key Impacts (Quantitative)

### Pillar 1: Access to Culturally Responsive Mental Health Services

- Q1 - The Mental Health Team included seven individuals. The breakdown of individuals includes a school social worker, three school counselors, a student support specialist, the community in school's site coordinator, and a school psychologist. Four members enrolled in the Urban Trauma certification program with a completion rate of 100 percent. Ten members enrolled in the Healing Centered Engagement practitioner training with a completion rate of seventy percent.
- Q2 - The Sankofa Mindfulness Room was primarily used by the Young Queens in Action. Fifty middle school girls were involved in ten sessions of culturally responsive mindfulness programming. The programming structure included:
  - Mindful Moment: Breathing exercises or short mindfulness activities
  - Community Circle Check-In: A space for girls to express their feelings and experiences
  - Lunch Break: Opportunity for social interaction and nourishment
  - Creative Expression Activity: Hands-on activity aligned with the session's theme
  - Checkout: Reflection and closing activity to wrap up the session

See Appendix 1 for program information.

On average seventeen Young Kings in Action used the Sankofa Mindfulness Room once a month through their classes and workshops. Additionally, fifteen participated in a weekly literacy empowerment program in preparation for the Generation Dream.

### Pillar 2: Access to Community Healing Circles

- Q1 - Sixteen circle keepers received training to facilitate community healing circles.
- Q2 - A total of fifteen Community Healing Circles were held. The breakdown of participants is as follows:
  - 83 - students
  - 32 - school staff
  - 158 - community members

The locations of the Community Healing Circles included MLK Middle School, MLK Community Garden, the National Association for Community and Restorative Justice Conference (Washington, DC), and the Happily Natural Day Sankofa Community Garden.

# Evidence-Based Findings

## Pillar 3: Access to Community Healing Spaces (Community Garden)

- Q1 - The Community Healing Spaces were accessible daily for students, MLK staff, and the Mental Health Team.
- Q2 - The Community Garden programming engaged students and teachers twice weekly for planned group classes. On average, twenty-four students attended the group classes. Individual students and staff were engaged throughout the day. On average, fifty-four students and five staff members were engaged with each other daily. Three community events have been held since the installment of the Ubuntu Labyrinth.

## Pillar 4: Involvement in anti-violence activism and awareness activities

- Q1 - On average, seventeen MLK students were engaged in anti-violence activism at any given period. Students engaged with twenty-five cultural artists, fifteen health advocates, and fifteen community activists in creating six educational materials and four awareness materials.
- Q2 - Attendance of anti-violence activism varied depending on the event.
  - Generation Dream XV - 150 participants (Appendix 2)
  - National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ) Pre-Conference - 60 participants
  - NACRJ Opening Ceremony - 1,902 participants
  - NACRJ Workshop - 75 participants (Appendix 3)
  - The Underground Circle - 75 participants

## Key Impacts (Qualitative)

Primary data for MRP's qualitative analysis was sourced from Focus Group (FG) transcriptions. (See Appendix 4 for FG date, attendees, and questions.) These data included observations about MRP program impacts and experiences related to the project's four delivery components. This report is intentional about the use of direct quotes from transcribed materials (page numbers included) as a way to reflect FG participants' agency and voice accurately.

## The Challenge

Focus Group (FG) members identified their work terrain as challenging yet also rewarding. An identified goal was working to mitigate the effects of systemic deprivations that program participants were regularly exposed to. "So you gotta be on top of working with kids and being able to validate a lot [of] what they're going through with the neighborhood violence, the competition between neighborhoods, parents being incarcerated,

**"Middle school is tough. It's probably the toughest section to work in"**

# Evidence-Based Findings

dealing with poverty, institutionalized racism, [and] the wounds of enslavement. So there's a lot going on here." (pg. 1) These structural challenges were also, however, coupled with participants' deep determination to be agents of persistent positive change. "But when you see [MRP] in action, you say, you know what, this work that we're doing, and us being consistent, [it's] paying off." (pg. 16) " ... like we have a responsibility to make a world that is better than what you live in. And like that doesn't change regardless of who's in power." (pg. 4)

## MRP's Approach

MRP's holistic approach was represented as featuring "push and pull" factors that highlight the relationship between historical context and the current environment. "[It's about] approachable programming that bridges history. So like Richmond shared history and how history affects our identities. And so I always say it's intersecting history, healing, and humanity." (pg.3) Focus Group participants also noted that MRP's approach was characterized by a unique "interweaving" of program components. "All of them [four project pillars] interweave because they're all restorative work and we do a really good job of integrating them." (pg. 9) This integrated four pillar approach shows up next in findings related to the project's four primary deliverables.

"Looking at all of the [MRP's] four pillars, I feel like they all really integrate"

## Pillar 1: Culturally Responsive Mental Health Services

**Cultural Relevance:** "Having access to someone who looks like you" (pg. 7)

Focus Group members highlighted the unique fit that was in place between MRP's participants and its mental health programming. They noted this in terms of program content (training in Urban Trauma and Healing Centered Engagement), as well as students' connection to culturally relevant program staff. Mention was made of staff's "relatability" (pg. 7), "our background knowledge" (pg. 8), and staff's presence in the local community. "We are there" (pg. 8), "Like that's where it's important because the kids see us around Richmond. They see us going into their space and they see us putting in the effort and energy just to, like, get to know them and be community members." (pg. 12) Benefits of this embedded approach included increased access and visibility: "[We are] spread out, like throughout the entire city to be a physical visual reminder of community for [the] kids." (pg. 12)

# Evidence-Based Findings

**Normalizing Mental Health Supports:** *“We provided safe and supportive spaces to be in dialogue around mental health” (pg. 7)*

FG members provided examples of the ways they actively connected participants’ lived experiences to their mental health wellbeing. “We focused a lot on the education of what mental health was through a lot of the things that we brought in the room. What does it [mental wellbeing] look like? We utilize[d] books. We utilize magazines for our kids to read through. We had conversations around what they saw in their homes and then offered moments to process them. ... [We met] Monday through Thursdays, 10 to 2. ... Whether they were in the classroom or something that might have happened at home prior to arriving at school. So just having one-to-one opportunity and then group circles with them, that was something that really met them.” (pg. 7)

**Enhancing Social Emotional Learning (SEL):** *“[We] use the room as a space for our youth to de-escalate and to also have an opportunity to process.” (pg. 7)*

Elements of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. FG members described their interactions with program participants as conduits for enhancing SEL skill development. They specifically identified equipping students with skills related to: self and environment awareness, increased self-regulation, managing grief, anxiety and depression, de-escalation techniques, and fostering opportunities for positive expression and self care. (pgs. 7,10)

**Augmenting Peer Support:** *“The kids came in and started consoling her [distraught peer] ... And that kind of took the edge off of all the trauma that was going on.” (pg. 16)*

One of the fungible resources available in many urban contexts is social capital. Peer support functions as a crucial social capital currency that is often necessary for survival. Students intuitively understand the power of social capital (social connection) and can be educated about its positive uses. Illustrating this principle is an example shared by one of our FG members. “... the day before [the school field trip] there was a shooting. [It] was on Falk Street, I believe. And a body was found in the trash can. And that happened right by the apartments of a couple [of our students]. ... Then one of the students had a major episode [on the field trip bus] because it happened right in front of her house over there. And we’re trying to figure this thing out. So we turn the bus back around, whatever, because it was a lot going on. But again, we’ve been working with some of the kids the previous years. ... and again you started to see ... now they’re empathetic. ... She almost broke down. The kids came in [to console her]. So again we’re literally seeing the pillars in action.” (pg. 16)

# Evidence-Based Findings

## Pillar 2: Community Healing Circles and Restorative Processes

**Reinforcing Social Cohesion:** *“They’re seeing that, hey, we’re coming together as a team, not as an individual. ... And then together, then we can come out of this thing strong.” (pg. 8)*

Social cohesion and positive collective identity are keys to community wellbeing. As noted in the quantitative part of this report, MRP contributed to these formation processes using Community Healing Circles and Restorative Practices. “So within our model, we’re bringing kids together, Young Kings, Young Queens, they are coming up here ... as a family. ... But it’s a challenge because, again, the neighborhood environment promotes individualism and competition that could turn deadly in the blink of an eye. So we are enacting these principles in real time with the kids in the individual session[s] and also in group sessions.” (pg. 8)

**Enhancing Conflict Resolution Skills:** *“They’re [now] thinking of regulation and conflict resolution and how they’re handling regular school peer to peer problems and how they are wanting to share breathing exercises with their peers.” (pg. 22)*

Focus Group members shared about specific practices they employed in the classroom (Community Building Turtles), as well as their observations around changes across time in how conflicts were managed. “We facilitated the Community Building Turtles in the classroom at the beginning of [each] day. And we would just pick different classrooms and then make sure that at least all the 6th grade students have that.”(pg. 11) “I think about the last probably five almost six years, and what I’ve noticed ... I’ve seen students change in terms of their thinking with regards to one way to deal with things. Now they’re more open, they are participating more with regards to the whole process: conflict resolution, [and] learning to work things out. So I’ve, you know, noticed that” (pg. 24)

**Investing in Longitudinal Development:** *“As the newer grades come in, it’s like the older grades, seventh and eighth can sort of be, the idea is for them to be a model for [the new kids], the sixth graders.” (pg. 22)*

The MRP is intentional about planning for the transmission of learning across class grades. This is important so that individual learning is inculcated into positive group mores. This is the case both as students develop individually and also as their grade cohorts mature. One FG member recounted working with a female student who began 6th grade with violent behavior and by 8th grade ended up mentoring others in Restorative Practices due to MRP’s tutelage.



# Evidence-Based Findings

"You know, one of my students who left last year, I had her in the sixth [grade]. ... When she first come down, she tore my room up. I mean, she just tore the room up. When she was in the sixth grade, I had to, you know, actually deal with her and spend some time processing. But ... we eventually ended up having a restorative circle and mediation with her. So we get to 8th grade and have the opportunity to, you know, talk with her and work with her on a few other occasions. And I know [this is one of the impacts] of the engagement that's taking place here in the mindful room and some of the other things that have been going on in the building." (pg. 16)

**Impacting School Climate and Culture:** "So it's really nice to see how this work is impacting the school culture." (pg. 22)

In the context of the MRP project, school culture is changing because of the introduction of daily practices that reinforce restorative mores. "So then we would lead a mindfulness activity on the morning announcements and our students that were a part of our programming would then lead those from this classroom, from this space over the virtual smart board." (pg. 11) Understanding the link between empowering students to conduct these everyday restorative practices and shifts in school climate is crucial: "And so you can kind of see the whole process, the restorative model. Those circle processes now, being kind of entrenched, in the environment, in the school." (pg. 24)

"They're [now] thinking of regulation and conflict resolution and how they're handling regular school peer to peer problems and how they are wanting to share breathing exercises with their peers."

## Pillar 3: Community Healing Spaces (Urban Garden & Sankofa Room)

**Connecting to Outdoor Spaces:** "So that the kids who might not hear what you're saying in the [class]room, they'll hear what you're saying in the garden." (pg. 9)

Focus Group members repeatedly highlighted the importance of connecting students to outdoor environments that contributed to their health and wellbeing. "I think it's important to knowledge also that while the garden space isn't necessarily a [formal] mental health space, [yet] we are doing the mindfulness work [there]. We're doing the restorative work in the garden as well, and it's a separate space. ... The garden is a metaphor. Like you kind of use the plants as a metaphor to explain these kind of things in a different way. ..." (pgs. 8,9) FG members also noted that MRP's curated outdoor garden and

# Evidence-Based Findings

Ubuntu Afro-Indigenous labyrinth allowed for students to get first-hand experience of plant growth processes, enhancing goal-setting skills across time.

**Dedicating Space for De-Escalation:** *“Our school social workers, our school counselors, would then utilize the [Sankofa Mindfulness] room as a space for our youth to de-escalate.” (pg. 7)*

The MRP replaced many forms of exclusionary discipline (school suspension and expulsion) with student engagements that fostered reflection, awareness, and insight. The Sankofa Mindfulness room is a key apparatus in this inclusive and restorative strategy. “And so just with the operation of the Mindfulness room, having someone available in this space. .. And so we utilize varying holistic practices to help address whatever situations were occurring. And a lot of them being things like our students might have been experiencing ... Just something [that] would have triggered something whether they were in the classroom or something that might have happened at home prior to arriving at school.” (pg. 7) These types of dedicated spaces, restorative environments that offer positive student interaction, can make all the difference in whether students remain present and engaged with the school system.

**Supporting Staff Resilience:** *“One of the pillars of Restorative Justice is to take care of yourself before you, like, try to go out and take care of [the] community.” (pg. 9)*

One of the bonuses of MRP’s dedicated spaces for mindfulness, de-escalation, and stress reduction, was that teachers, staff and MRP program volunteers could also avail themselves of these resources. “So now more teachers are like, oh, I can go out there and get rosemary for myself. Like, you don’t just have it in your hand because it appeared; I can go out there and get it myself. ... To give them the permission to go out there and harvest it themselves. It’s a way of them modeling regulation behaviors and mental health regulation behaviors for the kids. And then the kids also want to do that when they feel some type of way, right?” (pg. 9) Not only was the use of these spaces cathartic for staff, but it also visibly modeled wellbeing behaviors for students.

**Amplifying Youth Ownership:** *“And so it’s really a lot of it coming from activating student voice” (pg. 13)*

MRP’s engagement strategy was predicated on eliciting and honoring participants’ (youth) voices. An FG member described it this way: “And so it’s really a lot of it coming from activating student voice[s] about the things that they desire or the things that they needed or they wanted to see.” (pg. 13) “We did activation throughout the school as well, and it was always from student voice. So everything was like, what do you want to see at your school? I want to see a gratitude walk.

# Evidence-Based Findings

What do you want to see at your school? I want to say thank you. What do you want to see in your school? I want to highlight these black historians or movies or leaders." (pg. 13) " Engaging student voices at the genesis of activity conception and implementation was key to their buy-in.

## Pillar 4: Anti-Violence Campaign and Activism

**Building Community Partnerships:** *"It's like the school and the community got better [at] bridging that gap."* (pg. 12)

Part of MRP's community activism agenda emerged from the need to "bridge gaps" across community divides. This began with work to mitigate historic cleavages within local community contexts. "There's a lot of barriers have been in place in Churchill going back to like the 60s when the old Mosby was up and running. And I'm from Richmond, I went to RPS. You know, Mosby always had a bad name in the community ... but again it's just those barriers." (pg.12) MRP's efforts to bridge these types of trust gaps was challenging yet important work. Remarkably, students emerged at the forefront of trust building activities. The following is one of several arts-based examples of MRP's anti-violence activism that re-scripted the social terrain: "To give a quick anecdote about the art based anti-violence activism and the fact that the kids are being brought into collaborative spaces with people from different neighborhoods. The mural down there on the shed was done by a ... genius who's from Southside. ... And the kids were like, 'Why someone from Southside come and paint a thing [here]?!' And then [we] were able to have an open dialogue with a whole group of [our] kids. ... [To] reframe that conversation with them and to allow them to process it for themselves. Like why it's important for people even from Southside to be coming over here and doing good, positive stuff." (pg. 9)

**Mentorships That Matter:** *"... see[ing] in real time something that's transforming them"* (pg. 15)

Strategic mentorship programming emerged as a core MRP component. This took the form of weekly sessions for the Young Kings and Young Queens clubs (see Appendix 1), as well as exposure to outside mentors and influencers. Access to international artists and performances featured as key events that fostered "reach" for students (pg. 12). Additionally, local mentorship relationships were developed through university networks. "So we also have students from VCU coming in and ... being able to work with the kids in order to develop the spaces in a way that the kids are included in and in a culturally sound way. [To] work with the students to kind of bring out some of that creative stuff. That kind of lived experience ... [to] explore things and also having that reflected in their own neighborhoods." (pg. 11) "And so I think that's the next phase of what we're doing right now is to move into a full artistic expression that's going to cover poetry, painting up on the wall there, musical instruments. That's the next stage." (pg. 12)

# Evidence-Based Findings

**Boosting Parent Engagement:** *“Seeing those leadership skills and that knowledge come directly from them [students] in their own words. And then having their parents then see them in this different light that they might not have witnessed in the home.” (pg. 15)*

One FG member described the synergy between student arts performances and parents’ engagement this way: “And so then that then elevates the parents just joy and pride because many of them are, you know, working really hard, jobs [that have] really long hours. [And they] don’t get to build a relationship with their kids in the way that they want to. And our kids spend a lot of time here. And so I think it’s a sense of pride for our parents when they get to see those moments too.” (pg. 15) Another FG member highlighted increases in parent/teacher engagements across time. They recounted that eight years ago only one parent showed up for parent teacher conferences while more recently the “parental environment has picked up” (pg. 16) They went on to add that “the [arts activism] performances are so important because that’s an opportunity for [students] to share what they’ve been doing to the community and be celebrated.” (pg. 21)

**Enabling Imagination and A Futureview:** *“[Through MRP, students] are learning a craft and a skill set that can take you all over the world.” (pg. 12)*

A highlight of this RMHF grant cycle was sponsorship for the annual National Association for Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ) conference. FG members described the impact of this event this way: “And then we presented at the [NACRJ] conference. And just that performance, folks was in there crying, carrying on. It was powerful.” (pg. 12) These kinds of exposures build staff capacity as well as position students for future opportunities. “We’re creating a space where kids that normally don’t get seen or recognized can become heard and recognized and choose [to] share something that they’re proud of, which is what’s so important” (pg. 20)



# Future Opportunities

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## Sustainable Funding

As evaluators, an important takeaway from our time on-site related to the relationship between strong program impacts and the project's consistent longitudinal presence in the community. Roughly 25% of Focus Group (FG) time was spent on the topic of sustainable funding indicating the priority of this subject matter in participants' minds. Project staff addressed this topic from the perspective of the time and work it takes to build community trust. They also noted the health equity risks their students already face, highlighting that project funding fragility impacts on students as a form of structurally compounded "abandonment". Staff recounted stories of dipping into their own pockets to pay for project materials, stressing their own family and household systems. Moving forward, priority should be given to acquiring donor support that sustainably enables multiple-year funding cycles.

## Baseline Data and Retrospective Study

Several assessment challenges surfaced in generating evaluation data for this project. First, school FERPA legislation (Information Act) limited outside evaluator access to school records and participants. We therefore leaned heavily on self-reporting from project staff, a data source that can unintentionally feed bias reinforcement. In future, we would recommend that baseline data be gathered (by school personnel) and used as a starting point for longitudinal comparative analysis. Such data could include information such as: attendance records, number and types of violence incidents reports, pass/fail rates, SEL and SOL test/evaluation scores, rates of successful course and grade completion, etc. These types of metrics would further validate the data that already undergirds this project and could also provide points of comparison for control group sites. An additional recommendation (made by our technical expert) suggested that a retrospective study be undertaken to determine actual costs related to each project pillar. Generating this type of data would be important as a touch point for assessing the financial viability of project implementation at other sites.

## Structural Linkages

MRP staff highlighted the importance of structuring funding investments in ways that outdistanced changes in up-stream (state and federal) administrative posts and political climate. They specifically noted the incredible support and advocacy they have received from the local MLK Jr. Middle School Principal, Ms. Inett Dabney. They noted, however, that this type of gifted champion could not necessarily be assumed at other sites and schools. They therefore sought state and federal points of connection that could widen MRP's safety net and broaden networks of influence. Closer to home, comment was also made that it would be helpful to get teacher buy-in and input earlier on in the project cycle so as to ensure faculty support for student activities and project curricula.



# Future Opportunities

## Prototype Replication

A significant amount of time during our on-site discussions revolved around the strong resonance the MRP model has with other domestic and international programs/venues. (Note is made that the MRP's "upstream" prevention approach is particularly attractive because its presence can potentially save local jurisdictions significant funds spent on "downstream" remediations.) In order to facilitate program replicability at other sites, Focus Group members talked about the need for staff to become more specialized in their roles. Such role specialization would ensure that the lion's share of staff time was not gobbled up by site-based administration. Discussion also highlighted the importance of connecting to state and national networks as locations for funding collaborations around multi-site project replicability. In the interests of both specialization and multiplication, recommendation is made that in the future some staff time be dedicated to the development of subsequent iterations and expansions of the MRP model.

**"Seeing those leadership skills and that knowledge come directly from them [students] in their own words. And then having their parents then see them in this different light that they might not have witnessed in the home."**



# Conclusion

## Sacred Space

The reach of project impacts cannot always be fully calibrated in concrete terms. Many effects are only evidenced in participants' lives across time and once they are out of the reach of program parameters. In this regard impacts can be viewed as residual assets; assets that bear long-term returns. MRP is about the work of developing people; investing in the formation and deployment of the next generation's health and wellbeing. In keeping with this mandate, one staff member described MRP's work as follows (pg. 22):

"We talk about this being a sacred space. You can't really explain what reverence is, ... but the kids ... you can see them developing that for themselves."

## Stories that Count

One of the resounding questions we left with was this: "How can we get these stories told in a larger space?" (pg. 21) Staff pointed to the fact that through MRP's work, student voices were being amplified in positive and life-giving ways: "[There are] material benefits to their whole community [to them being] heard." (pg. 21) Another Focus Group member recounted MRP's story-generation capacity in this way:

"[The] leading stories that are being told [to these kids] are all negative. ... [But] there are so many amazing beautiful things happening [here]. ... I'm only one person. I was always bringing my own equipment, kind of like scrapping around, borrowing equipment, borrowing my time. Like I have a 9 to 5. But I came here, because I care about these stories."

## Resilience Readiness

Resilience; the power to move forward. Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School youth all have dreams for moving forward. The Massive Resilience Project enables them to do just that: it positions them with tools, skills, and experiences that create a platform of resilience readiness. Staff described their role in accompanying that process as a form of communal "showing up" (pg. 4).

"Showing up with this continued responsibility of hope."



# Acknowledgements

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## Generative Futures

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# Appendix 1

## Young Queens in Action Program Objectives, Meeting Dates, Special Session Re-Orientation

### Objectives:

- Build Self-Esteem: Encourage girls to explore their identity, values, and future aspirations.
- Empower Creative Expression: Through activities like creating apps or gratitude trees, girls can express their dreams and challenges in unique ways.
- Practice Mindfulness: Developing tools for emotional regulation and self-awareness through mindful moments.
- Foster Community: Build supportive relationships through community circles and peer engagement.

### Meeting Dates for 6th Grade Girls:

#### Group 1

- November 15: Orientation (Introduction, Community Agreements, Values, Schedule)
- November 20: Who Are You Really? (Self-reflection and identity exploration)
- December 4: Gratitude and Appreciation Tree (Creating a tree mural of gratitude)
- December 11: Build Your Profile (Create an app continuation)
- December 18: Closing/Wrap-Up (Reflection and celebration of progress)

### Meeting Dates for 7th-8th Grade Girls:

#### Group 2

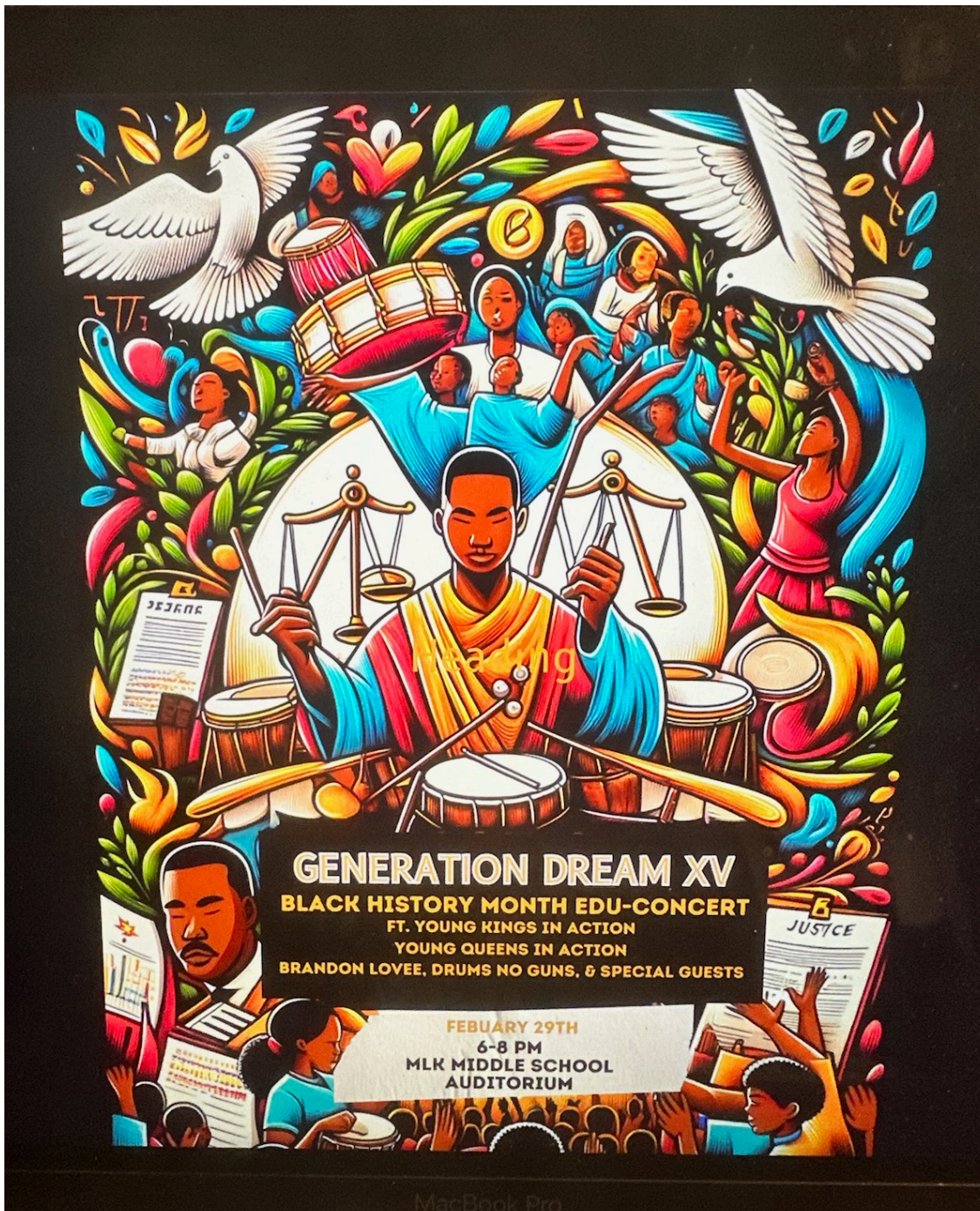
- November 14: Orientation (introduction, Community Agreements, Values, Schedule)
- November 20: Who Are You Really? (Self-reflection and identity exploration)
- November 29: Build Your Profile: Who Are You? Who Do You Want to Be? How Do You Get There?
- December 13: Gratitude and Appreciation Tree (8th Grade Hallway)
- December 18: Closing/Wrap-Up (Reflection and celebration of progress)

### Special Session: Re-Orientation

- January 29, 2024
- 11:30 AM - 12:45 PM
- Focus: Re-introduction to the program after the winter break, focusing on themes from "Genesis Begins Again" by Alicia D. Williams.

# Appendix 2

Promotional Material



# Appendix 3

## Promotional Material

9th National Conference for Community and Restorative Justice

**JULY 31**

# THE UNDERGROUND CIRCLE

Honoring Afro-Indigenous Pioneers of Restorative Justice

DRUM CIRCLE & OPEN MIC

8-11pm | M4 / Salon D  
Wednesday, July 31, 2024

Marriott Marquis  
Washington, DC

SPONSORED BY

DRUM CIRCLE & OPEN MIC

**JULY 31**

# THE UNDERGROUND CIRCLE

HONORING AFRO-INDIGENOUS PIONEERS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

9th National Conference for Community and Restorative Justice

8-11PM | M4 / SALON D  
WEDNESDAY, JULY 31, 2024

MARRIOTT MARQUIS  
WASHINGTON, DC

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9TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR COMMUNITY AND RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

# UNDERGROUND CIRCLE

HONORING AFRO-INDIGENOUS PIONEERS OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

WEDNESDAY | 8-11PM  
JULY 31, 2024 | M4 / SALON D

MARRIOTT MARQUIS, WASHINGTON, DC

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# Appendix 4

## MRP Focus Group Questions – November 7, 2024

1. What impacts did access to each of the project's 4 Pillars have on students, staff, and community members?
  - a. Pillar 1: Culturally responsive mental health services
  - b. Pillar 2: Community healing circles
  - c. Pillar 3: Community healing spaces
  - d. Pillar 4: Arts-based anti-violence activism
2. What stands out as the most transformative moment you observed/experienced working with the MRP program?
3. What significant barriers (practical or structural) stood in the way of project implementation? How did you overcome these barriers?
4. What impact did MRP have on school culture and climate?
5. Identify any unintended effects of the program (positive or negative)?
6. Moving forward, what recommendations do you have for a future iteration of the MRP at MLK?
7. What would need to be changed if MRP were to be scaled up and used as a prototype for work in other locations?

## MRP Staff & Volunteer Focus Group Attendees:

- Danielle Freeman-Jefferson
- Olufemi Shepsu
- Kiran Bhagat
- Ashley Williams
- Christopher Moore
- Ellis Sawyer

