

REIMAGING EDUCATION, REIMAGING PEACE



A Five-Year Report (2019-2023)

From Wisdom Projects

A United States 501(c)(3) Nonprofit Organization

Wisdom Projects, Inc.

Reimagining Education | Reimagining Peace | Reimagining the World



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A REMARKABLE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

Can around-the-clock, immersive training in peacemaking methods like de-escalation and restorative justice empower low-income community members to prevent violence? Can community members trained as "peacemakers" work through their traumas, feelings, and conflicts peacefully? Can articles, podcasts, and collective discussions about reimagining holistic education advance fresh avenues for liberated, peaceful learning for youth and families? Can a new culture of peace transform the health and wellness of youth, parents, and their families despite ongoing challenges of poverty and inequality?

The work of Wisdom Projects answers YES to these questions.

Headquartered in Baltimore City, Maryland, Wisdom Projects (officially, Wisdom Projects, Inc.) is a small, 15-year-old secular 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (EIN: 27-1060325). Though small, Wisdom Projects has a big story to tell to the world. That story is this: perpetual ceasefire, ongoing mediation, emancipatory education, and a revolutionary sense of love—even when one feels someone does not deserve it—heals and enlightens communities most in need of safety and equality.

This five-year report (with data, images, and explanations) tells the story of the remarkable impact of Wisdom Projects from 2019-2023.



Wisdom Projects has two divisions:

1. The **Chicago Wisdom Project** (founded in 2009 before formally becoming a nonprofit organization in 2010 by Theodore Richards and focused on thought leadership for anti-oppressive holistic education); and
2. The **Baltimore Wisdom Project** (co-founded in 2012 by Cleis Abeni (tree turtle) and focused on grassroots community organizing for violence prevention through STEM and healing arts).

Wisdom Projects is the result of the 2019 merger of both divisions into one nonprofit organization with two divisions using the older Chicago Wisdom Project's EIN. All of Wisdom Projects' community organizing and services to youth, adults, and families are free/no-cost. Wisdom Projects fund-raises to support its mission.

With the support of the NoVo Foundation, William Jordan, Gunpowder Friends, the Miles White Beneficial Society, Youth As Resources, the Black Trans Fund, the Baltimore Development Corporation, Education First, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, and scores of monthly individual donors who subscribe or give through platforms like Patreon and Benevity, Wisdom Projects has cultivated a culture of nonviolence and justice for predominately Black and Brown youth and adults in East Baltimore, and spread incisive messaging about peaceful, holistic education to the larger public through its magazine, podcast, and educational collective.



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR VIOLENCE PREVENTION

From 2019 through 2023, the **Baltimore Wisdom Project** (led by Cleis Abeni (tree turtle)) empowered 215 low-income, predominantly Black and Indigenous (from the Lumbee Nation) youth, parents, and other family members to become trained **peacemakers** who lead grassroots campaigns for nonviolence and wellness within their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and the streets. These community members live in housing projects in East Baltimore within a neighborhood challenged by high rates of poverty, violence, crime, and inequities towards its most marginalized Black and Brown residents. These housing projects

are Albemarle Square, Latrobe Homes, Douglass Homes, Pleasant View Gardens, Broadway Homes, and New Somerset Homes.

The housing projects surround the 203-year-old **McKim Center** (of the McKim Community Association Inc.), the oldest continuously active community center in the United States and a former site of the Underground Railroad that provided refuge for enslaved African Americans in the 19th century. Through a long-term Memorandum of Understanding, Wisdom Projects serves as the official **Educational and Health Services Partner** of the McKim Center.



From the end of 2017 until the beginning of 2019 (while working through and finalizing another community-organizing healing project at the 29th Street Community Center in Northeast Baltimore City),

staff of the Baltimore Wisdom Project visited almost every one of the 1,550 households within the housing projects. Between two to five people on average lived in each household. Staff moved door-to-door to converse with residents about their successes and challenges, bringing homecooked meals made by Cleis Abeni (tree turtle) and Sharon Williams to enhance the conviviality of the conversations and build trust with the community members. Key to building trust in our initial fieldwork were the following assurances that staff wished for community members to understand as we initiated our project:

- Our peacemaking efforts would fully benefit the population.
- Only community members that consented in writing within an intake process would participate in our holistic community organizing.
- Staff intended *them* to lead the peacemaking efforts as paid and trained community health workers, which we would call “peacemakers.”
- Staff was not conducting any form of adverse research that posed a danger to them.
- Staff would respect their privacy and abide by confidentiality measures to protect their identifying data within HIPAA, FERPA, and MPIPA federal and state laws.

After this face-to-face fieldwork, staff was able to gain extensive, firsthand data and narratives from community members about their identities, family makeup, everyday needs, goals, dreams, challenges, and experiences with violence and crime.

Staff used this evidence from the initial door-to-door, in-person fieldwork, to enroll approximately $\frac{1}{8}$ of the total population of the housing projects (or the people who live in subsidized housing) in the area. In 2019, staff of the Baltimore Wisdom Project began embedding ourselves daily within this East Baltimore neighborhood. As we organized constituents, we guided, trained, supported, and cared for them as they learned and practiced the wisdom of peacemaking through restorative justice, conflict resolution, de-escalation through mindfulness, Social and Emotional Learning, and trauma-informed care.

52 percent of the people that we serve are women and girls, and the remainder are men, boys, and nonbinary individuals. Over 90 percent of the youth and families that we serve report being trauma-impacted survivors and/or victims of violence. A majority of our adult enrollees have experienced addiction and recovery (approximately 68 percent). Many also have endured incarceration or their relatives have endured incarceration (approximately 65 percent). 45 percent of our enrollees are survivors of police harassment and/or police brutality.

Uplifting Community Health Workers as “Peacemakers”

As Darren Walker and david rogers (the latter's name is intentionally spelled lowercase) of the Ford Foundation emphasize in the March 2024 issue of *Inside Philanthropy*, an immersive, around-the-clock, community-participatory approach to violence prevention (also called a "community-based" method) is the best model to uplift true neighborhood peace and wellness. Yet, apart from organizations like Wisdom Projects, this model is not widely effectuated in the greater Baltimore area or it is not carried out in a detailed, systematic, well-managed, data-driven, and evidence-based manner. Wisdom Projects' pioneering community-participatory approach fills this gap.

Key to our approach is the uplifting and compensating of community members as Community Health Workers (CHWs), which we call Peacemakers. Research from the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, the *Journal of Global Health*, *Shelterforce*, and *Frontiers in Public Health* has found an "emerging consensus that CHWs should be paid," as Madeleine Ballard and her team argue in "Compensation models for community health workers."

Most of Wisdom Projects' program budget and a significant part of our operating budget goes towards monthly stipends for CHWs (or Peacemakers) to compensate their trained peacemaking work in the neighborhood. Their leadership has been key to the cultural transformation towards peacemaking within our community-participatory approach to violence prevention that is described in this report.

As the *Urban Institute* says in its "Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook," "In participatory work, we must remember that we are engaging with individuals as colleagues and partners, not as research subjects, constituents, or program participants. Paying people for their time is not an incentive; it's compensation for their expertise."

Six Programs

In 2019, after we bonded with the community, the Baltimore Wisdom Project's six programs took shape:

1. Youth Peacemakers Program:

The Youth Peacemakers Program is an intensive violence prevention, job-readiness, and pre-college/trade school preparatory program that empowers 25 enrolled youth aged 14-18 in East Baltimore to implement peacemaking broadly and deeply into their lives. Enrollees work (for \$15 per hour) within the STEM &

Healing Arts Peacemaking After-School Program at the McKim Center while receiving immersive job-readiness training, and engaging in peer support groups. They learn de-escalation through mindfulness, conflict resolution, trauma-informed care, restorative justice, and Social and Emotional Learning. Their work in the after-school program involves assisting with mentoring younger children, setting-up, cleaning-up, and supporting meal preparation and meal service. They also engage in regular healing circles like mediations and Amnesty Days. Enrollees learn the value of responsible employment as they become ambassadors for peacemaking. This program aims for participants to move and work out of their impoverished neighborhoods, to attend trade schools to gain intensive specialized training, to go to college, and to build a better life for themselves and their families away from the violence and crime within which they were exposed in their current zip code.

2. Parent Peacemakers Program:

The Parent Peacemakers Program is an intensive violence prevention collective for select parents or grandparents of youth enrolled in the **Baltimore Wisdom Projects'** programming. With ongoing training and peer support, the parents build campaigns to cultivate peace broadly and deeply in their lives. They spread nonviolent messaging within their homes, within the schools of their children, their neighborhoods, and the streets, on social media and by word-of-mouth. Enrollees attend monthly healing circles emphasizing peer support and receive training in de-escalation through mindfulness, conflict studies, trauma-informed care, restorative justice, and Social and Emotional Learning. The parents receive monthly stipends, monthly healthy food support, and limited wrap-around services for reaching milestones for peacemaking. They also engage in regular nonviolence programming like mediations and Amnesty Days.

3. STEM & Healing Arts Peacemaking Program

The STEM & Healing Arts Peacemaking After-School Program (from 3 pm to 6 pm, Mondays through Fridays) joins with the Athletics Program at the McKim Center (from 6 pm to 8 pm on week days and on select weekends) to form a comprehensive out-of-school-time holistic educational program for youth aged 5 through 18. The STEM & Healing Arts program emphasizes structured learning in STEM and Visual Arts integrated with peace education. This program also includes the **Baltimore Wisdom Project's** "Planet Protectors Laboratory," an environmental justice program for children.



4. Summer Peacemaking Camp

Each summer, in partnership with the McKim Center, the Baltimore Wisdom Project holds a 5-week summer day camp for youth aged 5 through 14 in July from 10 am to 3 pm, five days a week (Mondays through Fridays) featuring STEM lessons, athletics, and intensive training in peace education through conflict resolution, de-escalation through mindfulness, restorative justice, and Social and Emotional Learning.

5. Planet Protectors Laboratory

The Planet Protectors Laboratory (PPL) for youth aged 5-18 focuses on peacemaking for environmental justice through hands-on experimentation emphasizing indoor/outdoor growing, conservation, preservation, and innovative fieldwork like "EcoVoice," "PhotoVoice," "See It/Solve It," and "Vegetable or Fruit of the Month Campaigns." The PPL guides youth to care for their community and their environment in a manner that integrates urban environmentalism with peacemaking.



6. Conflict Resolution Education and Services

Conflict resolution through restorative justice is the programmatic glue that makes all of our programs impactful and effective. This work including the following on a weekly basis:

- Mediations within healing circles;
- Amnesty Day Thursdays, a regular healing circle focusing on apology, making amends, forgiveness, and affirmation; and
- Amnesty Day Truth and Reconciliations: extended, sometimes weeks or months-long mediations on select days-of-the-week involving groups of community members or families enduring seemingly intractable, long-term disputes.

Measuring

Creating a Culture of Supportive Evaluation

Within the East Baltimore community that the Baltimore Wisdom Project serves, we have created a culture of mutually supportive, ongoing evaluation in which community members work together to hold themselves and their families and peers accountable. Key to this culture of supportive evaluation is the

loving, clear, and restorative ways that community members learn to talk with one another and campaign for peace within their familial and neighborly networks.

We apply mixed qualitative and quantitative methods to gain data and measure the impact of our programming on enrollees. These methods include the following:

1. Self-reporting in quarterly and annual focus groups and individual counseling sessions about community members reduction of violent incidents and wellness;
2. Self-reporting using surveys with both multiple choice and open-ended questions (including "Peace Tracker" forms);
3. Observations of transformed behavior by adult staff, parents, and other family members; and
4. Archival research in investigative journalism as well as court and law enforcement records that document incidences of violence within the area that we serve.

Peace Tracking

Each month, community members within our Parent Peacemakers program fill out a confidential written "Peace Tracker" form that describes at least 3 incidents within the month in which they used their peacemaking training to mediate a conflict and find peace. Some of their stories involve finding peace and working through conflicts within themselves. Some involve working through conflicts with other people. A few community members submit Peace Trackers in audio form due to literacy issues. Staff members converse with community members about what is said in the Peace Trackers within counseling sessions. These Peace Trackers also provide ongoing stories about how community members elevate their leadership as peacemakers and achieve nonviolence.

Violence Prevention and Wellness Campaigns

Community members' campaigns have decisively helped stem the tide of violence and promote wellness within the lives of the approximately 200 community members that Wisdom Projects serves each year. In turn, these people's campaigns have reached scores more individuals within their familial and peer networks.



Using information from their training and evaluations, community members develop informational campaigns about peacemaking and wellness. These campaigns disseminate information by word-of-mouth or within social media posts, online chat group discussions, or video uploads to private online groups.

Many of these campaigns occur privately within community members' closed familial or social networks. The privacy helps protect and uphold the confidentiality of community members who may have arrest or conviction records or who may be discussing sensitive information amongst themselves. The emphasis on privacy also helps community members avoid censure and mistreatment from people in their community who are not committed to nonviolence and who sometimes mock the peacemaking efforts of community members.

No campaigns include mention of major crimes (such as murder, rape, assault, burglary, larceny, robbery, arson, vandalism, trafficking, drug commerce, and kidnapping), and neither Wisdom Projects or community members are harboring or abetting criminal activity of any kind.

Metrics

To determine the positive impact of the programming, from 2019-2023, we used the aforementioned data and approaches to measure 20 key metrics:

1. Ending homicides.
2. Reducing evictions.
3. Strengthening peaceful families.
4. Disarming.
5. Reducing domestic violence.
6. Reducing youth arrests and convictions.
7. Reducing adult incarceration.
8. Reducing violence against women, trans, nonbinary, and LGBTQ+ individuals.
9. Reducing verbal violence.
10. Cultivating recovery.
11. Reducing corporal punishment.
12. Elevating mental health.
13. Reducing stress and anxiety.
14. Uplifting leadership capacities.
15. Cultivating improved senses of self.
16. Coping with poverty.
17. Coping with bias.
18. Improved scholastic achievement.
19. Improved foodways.
20. Enhanced disease prevention.



Milestones

As a result of these measures, from 2019-2023, we achieved the following milestones for violence prevention, justice, and wellness for approximately 200 community members enrolled in our programming:

1. **Ending homicides.** At a time when upwards of 300 killings occur each year in the city (with several per week oftentimes), since we began our work in 2019, no one enrolled in our current programming has endured homicides and gun violence.

2. **Reducing evictions.** Since 2019, only 1 individual out of all those enrolled in our programs has been evicted due to a breach of lease for violence. This statistic is important because housing insecurity stands as one of the biggest barriers to peaceful living for the population that we serve in the housing projects. Helping them maintain housing by not breaching their leases nonviolence requirements is one of our most important missions.
3. **Strengthening peaceful families.** In 2019, in our conversations with community members, we discovered that violence often roots in problematic, un-healed relationships within community members' intergenerational families (both the families into which communities are born and those they choose). Since then, each year, over 90 percent of community members tell us that our training in de-escalation and managing conflicts peacefully has helped them mend bridges, strengthen relationships, heal broken ties, and, ultimately, maintain nonviolence within their families.
4. **Disarming.** In 2019, 71 percent of our enrollees reported having access to guns. By the summer of 2023, all relevant surveyed enrollees reported legally registering their firearms, storing them safely in locked receptacles away from youth, or using nearby Washington, D.C.'s Voluntary Surrender of Firearms program to disarm without fear of prosecution. (Washington D.C. has the Safe Harbor Act that allows individuals to surrender firearms without fear of being charged. The State of Maryland and Baltimore City does not have a similar statute at the time of this writing.)
5. **Reducing domestic violence.** When we began our work, the rate of domestic violence and intimate-partner violence was high among community members at 46 percent. This meant that almost half of enrolled community members were involved either as survivors/victims or perpetrators in monthly incidents of domestic violence and intimate-partner violence each year. By the beginning of 2022, we reduced the rate to 13 percent and holding.
6. **Reducing youth arrests and convictions.** When we began our work, 42 percent of middle and high school aged youth in our programming had contact with the criminal or juvenile justice systems through arrest or conviction. By the beginning of 2023, only 4 percent of enrolled youth were arrested and, since 2020, no youth enrollee has been convicted of a crime.
7. **Reducing adult incarceration.** Many adult enrollees have endured incarceration or their relatives have endured incarceration (approximately 65 percent of enrollees). Since 2021, we

have reduced the number of incarcerations (pre-trial and post-conviction) among our adult community members to 6 percent.

8. **Reducing violence against women, trans, nonbinary, and LGBTQ+ individuals.** 74 percent of our women, trans, and non-binary enrollees are adult survivors of physical violence and sexual violence. 34 percent have survived sex trafficking. By the summer of 2023, 80 percent of these enrollees (with slight variations for each form of violence) reported that our focus on de-escalation, trauma-informed care, and mindfulness helped them cope with their trauma. They also reported the cessation of self-harm and a reduction or elimination of harm against them based on our guidance in setting boundaries and seeking peer support. These community members also reported improved capacities to enter recovery for addiction and take advantage of our referrals for mental health treatment.
9. **Reducing verbal violence.** We have drastically reduced verbal incidents of harassment, bullying, and intimidation. At the outset of our work, 61 percent of all enrolled youth and adults reported involvement in this kind of verbal violence. By 2022, 23 percent of enrollees reported involvement in this violence.
10. **Cultivating recovery.** Addiction and substance use disorder are major factors in verbal and physical violence. A majority of our adult enrollees have experienced addiction and recovery (approximately 68 percent). We have helped 78 community members commit to recovery and addiction treatment.
11. **Reducing corporal punishment.** Corporal punishment (physical attacks) by parents to their children was a serious problem for 81 percent of our enrollees when we first surveyed them in 2019. By the summer of 2023, only 11 percent of our enrolled parents reported resorting to corporal punishment to address their children's behavioral problems. Enrollees reported applying our conflict resolution, de-escalation, and positive, strengths-centered accountability measures to uplift their children when they make mistakes.
12. **Elevating mental health.** By the end of 2023, we had helped 74 community members enter long-term Psychiatric Rehabilitation Programs. We help them use or seek counseling, mindfulness, and Social and Emotional Learning in tandem with medical interventions (like medication) to find inner peace.

13. **Reducing stress and anxiety.** Each year, approximately 82 percent and holding of enrollees consistently report reductions in stress and anxiety in their lives as a result of the equitable, non-judgmental, caring healing circles that we facilitate. This reduction in stress and anxiety allows community members to better maintain employment, become job-ready, improve their relationships, and maintain their mental and physical health. All of these hallmarks are key to violence prevention.
14. **Uplifting leadership capacities.** By 2022, 80 percent of our enrollees praised their own leadership capacities, consistently noting the effectiveness of their ability to move their family members and peers to work through conflicts peacefully and de-escalate in challenging situations.
15. **Cultivating improved senses of self.** So much of community education and community healing involves helping people to feel good about themselves as whole, productive people. By 2022, 76 percent of our enrollees reported a more accepting and affirming sense of their gendered and racial personhood with many community members sharing that they have healthier visions and understandings of their womanhood, manhood, and/or LGBTQ+ identities.
16. **Coping with poverty.** Poverty remains the most significant barrier to peaceful living for our enrollees, and ongoing governmental policies that dis-enfranchise them continue to exacerbate our efforts. Yet, each year, 70 percent of our enrollees report that our wrap-around services (like limited rental assistance, transportation, phone-replacement, support with administrative forms, and help with replacement of broken or outmoded household appliances) have helped them mitigate some of the effects of poverty as they prevent violence in their lives.
17. **Coping with bias.** Racism (and other forms of bias) are consistent barriers to peace and wellness for Black and Brown youth and adults in the United States. Within interactions with police or with officials in agencies, government, institutions, and schools, community members frequently report bias. Each year, 90 percent of our community members report that our work has helped them de-escalate in the face of bias to protect their mental and physical health.
18. **Improved scholastic achievement.** Each year, 83 percent of our youth enrollees report that our emphasis on de-escalation, mindfulness (calm and focused awareness), and conflict resolution has improved their grades in school. They also report increased ability to cope with and/or avoid toxic conflicts and aggression from their peers in school.

19. **Improved foodways.** Research shows that a nutrient-rich, fresh healthy diet helps to prevent aggressive and violent behavior. (Visit <https://baltimorewisdomproject.org/foodways> for reference to the research). Each year, over 90 percent of community members praise our Foodways Initiative, citing the ways that it makes them feel less agitated and aggressive while teaching them about the vital role that nutrition plays in their wellness. We serve one healthy, fresh, nutrient rich meal at every healing circle, learning session, and community gathering. These meals include low sodium and sugar with an emphasis on lean proteins, vegetables, fruit, and water (with the occasional fun snacks) according to Michelle Obama's MyPlate initiative. Community members report that our Foodways Initiative also helps them mitigate food insecurity borne of poverty and the lack of a grocery store in the neighborhood (a barrier that advocates call "food deserts") within walking distance or accessible by a bus ride that takes a half an hour or less.

20. **Enhanced disease prevention.** Disease prevention goes hand-in-hand with violence prevention. Within our networks, we have led the way in encouraging community members to vaccinate against diseases (including COVID-19), while masking, hand-washing, sanitizing, and protecting themselves from STIs through safe sex materials like condoms and dental dams. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we began providing free KN95 and N95 masks and nitrile gloves, and we still provide these items today. We were one of the earliest community organizations devoted to these health practices in the city. From 2020 to 2023 we also provided free FDA-approved COVID-19 self-tests. Overwhelmingly, community members praise these efforts for their role in eliminating barriers as they uplift their capacities for disease prevention.

Complex Results

Over the last five years, the **Baltimore Wisdom Project** also discovered complex results concerning two areas of our community-organizing work in East Baltimore.

SEL Education

We began our work in 2019 after immersing ourselves in literature about the ways that Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can prevent violence. By the summer of 2023, we discovered that, while community members reported intermittent success in SEL, the five interrelated competencies of SEL

(self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) require considerable adaptation to ensure that their implementation is culturally-responsive and culturally-sensitive to community members.

Over 90 percent of community members (inclusive of youth and adults) annually reported heightened and increased self-awareness that helped them make better decisions to avoid and mitigate violence. Yet, only 43 percent of adult community members annually reported progress in self-management, routinely raising concerns that the ongoing struggles of poverty, health problems, and mistreatment by governmental agencies—including the police—made it exceedingly difficult to self-manage their everyday commitments and feelings. Moreover, evaluative observations by staff and family members revealed that, each year, 55 percent of youth appeared to regularly demonstrate progress in self-management. During focus groups, the youth often shared stories of ongoing health crises within their family, money troubles, mistreatment by police, and bullying or other harm by peers in school. They shared that these barriers influenced their inability to self-manage their behavior.

71 percent of community members (inclusive of youth and adults) annually reported improved pro-social awareness. But, of these people, many simultaneously said that their social awareness was better tuned to how they could protect themselves from others emotionally and physically instead of building new or revised healthy relationships. These enrollees often said that, for them, social awareness meant that they were learning how to nonviolently confront those that seemed to be against them, and that our SEL education helped them become more adept at, as one community member said, "watching my back."

While these enrollees annually reported better relationship skills (maintaining nonviolent rapport), when asked what relationship skills meant to them, many also said that their improved relationship skills did not mean that their relationships always felt positive. Overall, only 13 percent reported maintaining positive relationships from 2019 to 2021 with a small increase of 2 percent in 2022 and 2023. Yet again, enrollees reported that the pressures of poverty, health problems, mistreatment from peers, and mistreatment from the police or governmental entities like the housing authority or social services.

From 2021-2023, many adult enrollees reported theft of their public assistance funds (allegedly initiating within the social service offices), a problem documented by numerous local news reports. They described a failure by police and other governmental entities to do anything about the missing food assistance and family aid funds. These enrollees reported these systemic problems had a ripple effect, undermining their relationships within their homes, neighborhoods, and schools because they did not have reliance resources to care for themselves and their families.

While 63 percent of youth and adult enrollees combined annually reported being able to make more responsible decisions, the same number also reported that their best decisions did not seem to be enough to ameliorate the systemic problems in their lives.

Thus, Wisdom Projects has much work to do over the next few years in adapting SEL education so that it accounts for the systemic cultural barriers that make emotional regulation, relationship building, and life management difficult for community members by no fault of their own.

Trauma-Informed Care

We have always viewed trauma-informed care as what Shawn Ginwright calls "healing centered-practice." In this regard, we do not reduce people to their traumas and we prioritize people's strengths. They are the best assets in their own healing. Moreover, we emphasize *care* (nurturing engagement) in our trauma-informed care. Over the five-year period, we gained complex results in the administration of trauma-informed care (which is often also called trauma-informed practices by clinicians).

70 percent of enrollees annually reported improved capacities to move away from violence stemming from their trauma and greater ability to stop the 7 "Fs" (or common reactions) to trauma with the help of trauma-informed care. (These Fs are fighting, fleeing, freezing, flopping, finagling, fawning, and flash-backing).

Yet, only 12 percent of youth and 5 percent of adults reported feeling completely improved (meaning, wholly repaired, restored, and resilient) as a result of trauma-informed practices. In other words, while they learned to cope and avoid problematic reactions to trauma, they still felt that the effects of their trauma and the symptoms of conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder remained ongoing challenges in their lives.

Continuing mental health challenges, poverty, mistreatment by peers in the community not committed to peacemaking, and struggles with addiction persistently played a persistent role in the lives of adult enrollees. Many youths reported that ongoing mental health challenges (like "feeling so sad I can't move," as one youth said or being "so angry that I want to keep fighting like in a video game") were ongoing barriers to overcoming their trauma. These youth also said that poverty, their own or their family members' health problems, and ongoing mistreatment by their peers in school were also considerable external barriers to their internal progress in overcoming their trauma.

These youth also routinely said that shootings and other forms of violence in their schools made them feel as if, as one child explained, “violence is everywhere” and they could not learn adequately in school because, as another child said, too many people “who ain’t in the program have guns and bring them to school.” By “in the program,” the youth meant, in the Baltimore Wisdom Projects’ peacemaking programs.

The strategies valued by the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care (NCTIC) emphasize sensory and embodied practices. Yet, it seemed that some forms of sensory and embodied experiences were often so triggering or culturally alienating for our enrollees that they said that it was difficult for them to sustain their attention within our healing-centered mindful music education and mindful movement education.

The demand to sense deeply, move their bodies in structured ways, or touch in safe dance exercises frequently triggered and alienated our enrollees who reported that the mindful movement experiences of Yoga, Body Mind Centering, Capoeira, and Contact Improvisation was “scary,” “too aggressive,” or “too demanding” even when they seemed to like aspects of the mindful movement education. Three enrollees reported shutting down because the sensory nature of the movement experiences made them “flash-back” to traumatic experiences in their lives. Only solo meditative hand gestures or mudras seemed to result in no problematic responses. Instead of engaging in mindful movement, many youth enrollees just wanted to make and video-record TikTok dances using their cellphones.

Overwhelmingly, enrollees reported feeling more relaxed when listening to the meditative music played upon entering the learning spaces. Yet, at the same time, enrollees overwhelmingly felt that the music used during healing lessons was culturally insensitive. One repeatedly said, “Why can’t you play rap,” citing the songs that he enjoyed, noting that, he gets so pumped up that he feels like he could “take on the world.”

Without prompting, youth readily admitted that the music that they enjoyed contained violent and hyper-sexual language and depictions and loud, driving rhythms. They would preface discussions with statements like “You aren’t going to like this because it has nasty words” or “this song isn’t peaceful.” They reported feeling aggressive and hyper-active when listening to the music that they enjoyed, and they identified these feelings as counter-productive to a sense of peace in their lives.

Nonetheless, over the five-year period, the youth we surveyed continued to believe that the music that they enjoyed was a better coping mechanism to temporarily overcome their trauma. Importantly, no

youth claimed that any form of music—be it what staff played or their own musical tastes—directly made them violent.

Healing visual art education seemed to be the least problematic for youth as a form of therapeutic, embodied trauma-informed care. Thus, by the beginning of 2022, while playing soft mindful music when they entered into the building for lessons, we shifted to visual arts education as our main form of artistic, embodied therapeutic education. Yet, even here, there is a caveat: at the end of 2022, 11 youth reported, visual art lessons were best suited only for short periods of time (no more than a 45 minutes) because they felt that it was hard for them and their peers to sustain their attention on any form of art-making, be in visual art, music, or dance, for longer periods.

Thus, we have much work to do over the next years in adapting art education (especially mindful movement and mindful music) to the needs of culturally-sensitive trauma-informed care.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP FOR HOLISTIC EDUCATION

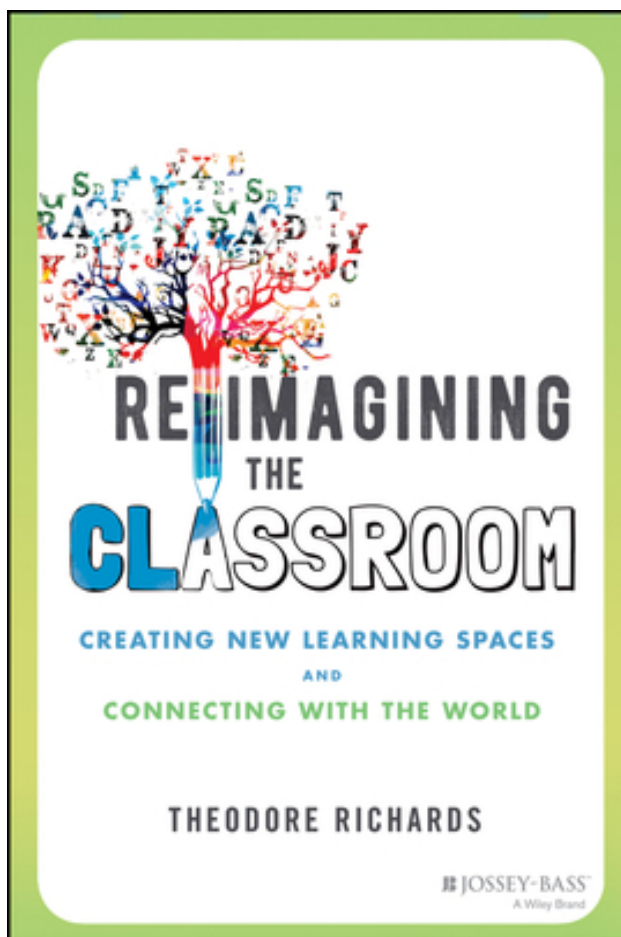
Upon merging with the Baltimore Wisdom Project in 2019, the **Chicago Wisdom Project (CWP)** (led by Theodore Richards) focused on thought leadership for holistic education. (For the first decade of its existence, the CWP also ran educational programs for youth and families on the south side of Chicago). After 2018, the CWP worked across the country to inspire a different kind of conversation about education, one that sees our youth through the lens of an “asset narrative,” based on the gifts they bring, rather than a “deficit narrative” that focuses on what is wrong with them. Our “Reimagining” publications, media messaging, and collective organizing are about creating vibrant, holistic, liberatory learning spaces that emphasize relationships over competition. Our work is about fostering a process of questioning and reimagining the stories we have been told about our place in the world.

Our model of thought leadership allows for Wisdom Projects to scale our work to fit our size without the need for building a larger infrastructure. We believe that the creativity and insights that educators possess should be honored, and spreading the work through dialogue—and through webs of relationship rather than hierarchical institutions—exemplifies our educational approach. To this end, we have created a variety of pathways for educators across the country to engage in a process of shared inquiry about reimagining education.

1. **ReImagining Magazine:** Created as a way to take some of the ideas and creativity that was inspired by our work with youth, ReImagining is an online magazine for people who believe that the stories of the modern world no longer sustain us. Our challenges cannot be solved merely through technology, or even politics; rather, we need to re-imagine what it means to be human. This is a particular concern for educators, and we have invited a variety of educators to share their wisdom and to engage in the conversation. In addition to the work of Wisdom Projects leadership (Theodore Richards and Cleis Abeni (tree turtle)) we have featured leading education scholars and activists like Derrick Brooms and Bill Ayers; MacArthur fellow, ornithologist, and poet J. Drew Lanham; and spiritual leaders Mirabai Starr and Matthew Fox.



2. **The ReImagining Podcast:** Launched in 2020, The ReImagining Podcast is an outgrowth of ReImagining Magazine. It has a particular focus on education (our 2022 season was devoted entirely to educators). We have featured the artist and activist Tonika Johnson; philosophers Bayo Akomolafe, Brian Swimme, Deepak Ramola, and Charles Eisenstein; educators Bill Ayers, Derrick Brooms, Tomas Ramirez, and Akilah Richards; and spiritual leaders Matthew Fox and Julian DeShazier.



2. **The Reimagining Education Collective:** Formed in 2023, The Reimagining Education Collective is a group of educators from around the world that comes together to share, learn, and create new ideas and practices to reimagine education for an age of new possibilities and peril, transformation, and transition. The group meets regularly to build connections across disciplines and across geographic barriers, to foster mutual support and to bring forth new ideas and projects rooted in shared values and principles. With its emphasis on building worldwide webs of relationship through shared values, the Collective serves as a structure and springboard for the vision and mission of Wisdom Projects to be shared and implemented in new settings.
3. **Public Events and Workshops:** Theodore Richards has routinely spoken, taught courses, and led trainings and workshops in a variety of settings for the past five years. Some highlights include college classes he has taught at Becker College and The University of Illinois-Chicago; lectures delivered at Lewis University and The University of Chicago; workshops led at Siena Center, The

Well, and the Zen Life and Meditation Center; and keynote addresses at The American University in Paris and the 2023 Public Media Awards.

4. ***Reimagining the Classroom***: Published in 2022 by Wiley/Jossey-Bass, Theodore Richards's book *Reimagining the Classroom* synthesizes his work at Wisdom Projects, offering a comprehensive philosophy of education along with practical, hands-on activities for educators. It begins with questions: "Why do schools focus on training our children in skills and knowledge that may soon be obsolete? How can we address the anxiety and depression in our children as its own epidemic? What is the purpose of an education anyway?" Theodore Richards's provocative book asks us to reconsider some of our basic assumptions about the world, our relationship to it, and our relationships with each other. It helps educators' question and recast these assumptions and practices in order to consider how an educated person might not merely attain personal success but find a deeper flourishing and create a better world. And it provides practical steps and examples parents and educators can use to begin to create new learning spaces, approaches, and outcomes. Ultimately, Dr. Richards suggests that it is not merely the educational content that matters. Rather, we teach most profoundly by creating a space that serves as a metaphor for the world—a metaphor through which our values are expressed. A critical look at our education reveals how impoverished our lives—and the lives of our children—have become: We are educating our children to think of themselves as mere consumers rather than creators, to beware of the world rather than behold it, to think of themselves as isolated individuals rather than participants in communities and in the broader web of life.

REVOLUTIONARY LOVE IN A TIME OF VIOLENCE

Wisdom Projects' work remains urgently needed. According to the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law, there are more than 110 wars (or armed conflicts) raging across the world. In most states, cities, and jurisdictions in English speaking worlds, police departments are extravagantly funded with increasingly militaristic equipment, technology, and values. Yet, community participatory work like that of Wisdom Projects is underfunded and under-valued. Baltimore City (in which Wisdom Projects community-organizes for violence prevention) and other urban areas are experiencing an uptick in punishment-centered, vengeance-focused retributive justice with new laws, policies, and measures enacted to solve behavioral problems by arresting, fining, incarcerating, and convicting low-income Black and Brown people. This uptick mirrors increased global problems with war and political violence.

Yet, as hundreds of clinicians, educators, and researchers have argued over the last thirty years, evidence-based, holistic public health-centered restorative justice far more successfully helps people manage conflicts, hold each other accountable, and cultivate individual and collective wellness. Often harsh, militaristic policing and brutal court-focused criminal and juvenile justice methods only intervene after conflicts have metastasized into violence thereby amping up suffering. Yet, immersive community participatory practices like that of Wisdom Projects prevents harm (not just intervening after the fact) and helps to truly transform communities. This community-organizing helps people overcome traumas and cultivate ongoing, collective healing. This five-year report on the powerful impact of Wisdom Projects' work sends a beacon of hope for better living for the most marginalized Black and Brown people, and tells the story of the continuing, urgent need for Wisdom Projects' model of community education and community healing.

AUTHORS

Cleis Abeni (tree turtle), Co-Director (Co-CEO) and Board Vice President (2024-2026) of Wisdom Projects, and Director (CEO) and Co-Founder of the Baltimore Wisdom Project. A former Registered Nurse (RN), Registered Nurse in Psychiatry (RNP), and Licensed Social Worker (LSW), Cleis (tree) has developed, implemented, and evaluated evidence-based youth and adult programming for nonviolence, STEM, and healing arts for over 30-plus years. A nonprofit leader who has uplifted programming, communications, operations, and fundraising for 11 organizations, she is a 30-plus-year-long ordained Buddhist Upāsikā whose published writing and editing for small presses received a 2001 Pushcart Prize. Certified in trauma-informed care and conflict resolution, she was one of the first practitioners to introduce restorative justice and mindfulness into community programming in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area. For more information, visit www.cleisabeni.com and www.treeturtle.com.

Theodore Richards, Co-Director (Co-CEO) and Board President (2024-2026) of Wisdom Projects, and Director (CEO) and Founder of the Chicago Wisdom Project. He has decades of experience in nonprofit leadership, writing & editing, and education. As a philosopher, writer, and professor, Theodore Richards's work is dedicated to re-imagining education and creating new narratives about our place in the world. He has received degrees from various institutions, including the University of Chicago and The California Institute of Integral Studies, but has learned just as much studying the martial art of Bagua; teaching in various settings and students; and as a traveler from the Far East to the Middle East, from southern Africa to the South Pacific. He is the author of eight books and numerous literary awards, including two Nautilus Book Awards and three Independent Publisher Awards. His latest book, *Reimagining the Classroom*, is

now available. He lives on the south side of Chicago with his wife and three daughters. For more information, visit www.theodorerichards.com.

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