



# client case study

## HOW THE COMPASSIONATE DIALOGUE JOURNEY HELPED ONE EDUCATOR DEEPEN HER APPLICATION OF THE RIR PROTOCOL

"We have to get to a place where people with very different opinions can come to the table and have a conversation. We can agree to disagree, but it doesn't have to be an 'I hate that person' type of situation. This is an ongoing challenge. Compassionate Dialogue gives us a path to follow."

*-Diane Stevenson, M.A., P.P.S  
Elk Grove Unified School District, Universal Equity  
Program Specialist*

### HIGHLIGHTS

Elk Grove Unified School District is located in Sacramento County, California. With over 8,000 employees, it proudly serves nearly 63,000 students and has one of the most diverse student populations in the state. Over 120 languages are spoken in the district.

#### Challenges

- Teacher/staff diversity not on par with that of the student population, leading to more opportunities for growth, conversation, and engagement
- A tendency to feel that equity work needs to be perfect and a hesitancy (both personal and collective) to "make a mistake" by saying the "wrong" thing, etc.
- Desire to build deeper confidence using the RIR Protocol (enough to teach/train others)

#### Solution

- A deeper exploration of the RIR Protocol
- Tools and prompts specifically to address binary thinking, conflict, and identity
- Moving through the Compassionate Dialogue Journey with a group, providing additional RIR Protocol practice and discussion that transitions into real-life application

#### Results

- Educators and staff have a framework for healthily engaging with students and one another
- The internalization of the fact that giving ourselves and others grace and permission to be "imperfect" is integral to progress
- District offering CDJ as a staff book study in upcoming semesters

## CHALLENGES

Diane Stevenson has been in education for 33 years—some as a classroom teacher, some implementing positive behavior intervention, and some leading other equity specialists. She has long been passionate about all things equity, at one point interning with juvenile hall.

“Growing up in a traditional white-normed home where conflict was bad and you just kept silent, this has been an interesting and enlightening journey as an educator,” she said. “But it feels like my life’s work. I’m delighted I can work at a systems level to hopefully shift some of the narrative.”

Diane had significant familiarity with The RIR Protocol before coming to the *Compassionate Dialogue Journey*, having taken EPOCH Education’s workshops in San Diego. This context felt helpful, especially because she is responsible for rolling out Restorative Practices in her district.

“Restorative Practices describe a framework for how we respond to each other in building a community where every person is valued,” she said. “And if harm is created, the intention of the work is to bring the community back together. BUT everyone has to feel part of that community first. The RIR [Protocol] and Compassionate Dialogue are very complementary here. I wanted to do a deeper dive and try to gain more skills I could use as go-to’s in building community. And I think RIR is such a brilliant way to begin that conversation, especially with people who don’t want to engage.”

Building community and a sense of belonging is always important, but it’s top of mind for Diane in particular because the student population in her district is incredibly diverse—a trait not shared by educators and staff. This dynamic is a common one throughout the country.

“Our students don’t really see a lot of teachers who look like them,” Diane said. “So, the intention behind building community is a big deal here. It’s a beautiful springboard to show the importance of this work, and these tools will help us.”

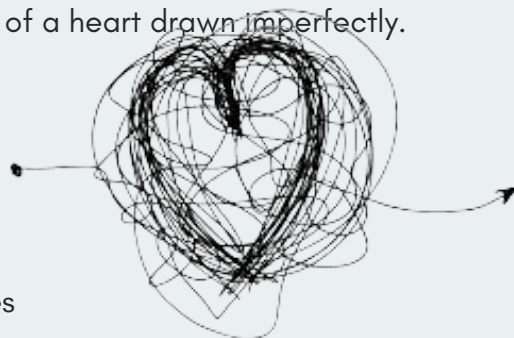
## SOLUTIONS

Diane admits she wasn’t sure what to expect from the *Compassionate Dialogue Journey* compared to her prior experience with Dr. Dome’s first book, *Let’s Talk About Race (and Other Hard Things): A Framework for Having Conversations That Build Bridges, Strengthen Relationships, and Set Clear Boundaries*—her first RIR Protocol reference point.

“I wondered if it would be repetitive because I’d read the book and done so many of the workshops before,” she said. “But it wasn’t. I found so many great reinforcements and other strategies to use.”

Particularly, the Equity Avatar activity spoke to Diane. When tasked with choosing an image to represent where she was at on her equity journey, she landed on a drawing of a heart drawn imperfectly.

“I call it ‘complexity,’” she said. “Especially being a white woman in the world I serve, people make assumptions. They say things to me they would never say to a woman of color. There are all these nuances to who I am, how I show up, all of that. It’s the same for all of us. But it’s always encapsulated with love—the intentionality is love for other people. I love the lines in the drawing because they show that even in the messiness, we can come out on the other side.”



## SOLUTIONS (CONTINUED)

The Cycle of Inference has played a role for Diane, too. She found it illuminating to self-reflect on assumptions she's made, especially in her personal life.

"This idea felt adjacent to some of what Brene Brown talks about, really. Examining the story you're telling yourself," she said. "It's a constant and practical reminder to look at my own responses and how I'm showing up in spaces."

These tools in particular, and others, have not only served Diane on a personal level, but they've also been fruitful from an organizational perspective. She has shared her Equity Avatar in a meeting when her team was going through a challenging dynamic, and it served as a grounding mechanism. She has also used the Identity Activity with her team and found it to be "a great opportunity for conversation about how acknowledging and self-reflection can impact the way we engage with our students, our families, and other people in our lives. They wanted to do more."

## RESULTS/IMPACT

After moving through the Compassionate Dialogue Journey, Diane has a deeper understanding of the RIR Protocol and is incorporating it into programming in her district, including offering it as a book study and a component of Restorative Practices. She feels empowered by her expanded knowledge of the Protocol and is eager to share it with others.

Here's how that looks in action: Diane recently found herself at a back table during an equity training session (she was observing this time, not participating or leading). The facilitator asked the group to practice with a Conversation Starter Card, and a colleague sitting across from her drew a blank.

"The card was something like 'that student will probably end up in jail,'" she said. "I asked him how he'd respond, and he said that, to be honest, he probably wouldn't because he didn't like confrontation. But that he'd be thinking it was a terrible thing to say."

Diane continued to ask questions, prompting him to consider what the teacher in the hypothetical practice-scenario might say when presented with a calmly-stated, "Help me understand why you said that."

"He pointed out that the teacher might say the student doesn't turn in homework and is always late to class, or something to that effect," she said. "We talked about continuing with curiosity and compassion, maybe even by asking if the teacher had ever asked *why* the student was falling behind or always late. Not in a judging way, but in a curious one. Things seemed to click for him after we walked through that example together because he realized it doesn't have to be all conflict."

This example points to a larger reminder and, for Diane, a key result of The Compassionate Dialogue Journey: internalizing the fact that it's okay to not have *all* the answers *all* the time. That the point is the forward motion, not perfection.

"Doing equity work, I constantly have to remind myself and encourage my team about this," she said. "We need to give ourselves and each other grace. It's reassuring to think, 'I don't have to do all of the things right now. What is the next step I'm willing to take? What can I do today?'"