

PEP Talks: Episode 2 Restorative Justice & Cultural Competency

[00:00:00] **Olivia Haas:** [00:00:00] What would education look like if instead of asking students to adjust who they are and conform to traditional school constructs, the schools themselves adjusted to meet students and families where they are? Hello, and thank you for tuning into PEP Talks: Podcasts on Educational Possibilities produced by the National Coalition of Girls' Schools. [00:00:23] I'm Olivia Haas, your host.

In this episode, I'm joined by the heads of two NCGS member schools:

- Jadi Taveras at Esperanza Academy in Lawrence, Massachusetts, which is located about 40 minutes North of Boston and
- Maura Farrell at Sophia Academy in Providence, Rhode Island.

Esperanza and Sophia academies are both middle schools for girls, which were founded within the last 20 years to address academic and social disparities among underserved, low-income families living in their local communities Both have a central focus on restorative justice practices and a commitment to bridging the [00:01:00] opportunity gap for the graduates. There are also schools that believe in the inherent wisdom of each girl, helping to not only support her intellectual growth, but also her emotional growth as she travels her path of self-discovery.

[00:01:12] So, before speaking with today's guests, I've asked NCGS executive director, Megan Murphy, to share a little information about some particularly relevant NCGS resources. Thanks for joining me, Megan.

[00:01:25] **Megan Murphy:** [00:01:25] Hey, Olivia, I'm really happy to be with you today. And I'm looking forward to hearing your conversation with Jadi and Maura. [00:01:32] I think not just because of the timeliness of what you will be discussing but also, because I think it's a great continuation from the last episode of PEP Talks. So, for anyone who hasn't heard it yet, I do encourage you to listen to last month's episode on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging. And along those lines, I also think our listeners might really benefit from reading the most recent posts to our Raising Girls' Voices blog.

[00:01:58] They focus on [00:02:00] social justice, anti-racism and the intersection of gender and race. These posts include:

- why we are seeing black ads, social media accounts, calling out our schools for racism.
- how building diverse school communities is just not enough. It really needs to be about creating spaces and places of belonging as well.
- And then there's a really powerful post, umm talking to the Class of 2020 that inspires them to use their voice and collective power to advocate for inclusion.

Lastly, I want to quickly mention the Topics of interest toolkits available to NCGS member schools on our website. It's in the member resource center of ncgs.org and our educators can access, uh, wide variety of curated content on topics that are relevant to girls, schools, and also on the healthy development on education of girls. [00:02:59] For [00:03:00] example, under the DEI category tab, there's a section called Social Justice, Anti-racism and Race Relations. There you will find some suggested readings and also films and recommended consultants and sample DEI action plans and statements. I think it's a really powerful collection of resources that you've been working on Olivia.

[00:03:22] And I think it's one that we're really interested in growing through recommendations from our listeners. So please everyone let us know if there are resources that you have found to be particularly helpful. In your DEI work and we'll include them for all of your NCGS colleagues to access.

[00:03:41] **Olivia Haas:** [00:03:41] Great. Thanks so much, Megan, that's really super helpful [00:03:43] and I look forward to receiving some of those resources from our schools to add to the topics of intersection. Thanks again. Here's a brief glossary of terms for words you'll be hearing throughout this episode:

- **Restorative Justice** is a set of values that when practice as a community [00:04:00] creates a transformative paradigm shift in how we relate to one another, learn and grow.

Restorative Justice [00:04:06] reimagines harm, not as rules broken, but instead as relationships that need to be repaired.

- **Community Cultural Wealth** as defined by Dr. Tara J. Yosso, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Riverside, “is an array of knowledges, Skills, abilities and contacts possessed and used by communities of color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression.” [00:04:32] Yosso notes that when we shift our lens away from a deficit view of communities of color and consider their experiences in a critical historical light, we can document barriers, forms of capital nurtured through cultural wealth, including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant capital.
- **Cultural Competence** is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with [00:05:00] people across cultures. It encompasses:
 - being aware of one's own worldview
 - developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences
 - gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews and
 - developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures.

[00:05:16] Cultural competence is much more than just having an awareness. And being respectful of different cultures and cultural differences, it requires the ability to identify and challenge one's own cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs. Jadi Maura, thank you for being with me today! I'm really looking forward to this conversation.

[00:05:36] So let's start at the beginning. Talk to me a little bit about the foundational roots of Esperanza and Sophia academies and the communities in which your schools are located. Maura, let's start with you.

[00:05:47] **Maura Farrell:** [00:05:47] Olivia thank you. While Sophia Academy is non-sectarian, we were founded in 2001 by a legendary sister of mercy from South Providence sister, Mary Riley, who will turn [00:06:00] 91 in December.

[00:06:01] And she and her sister's collaborative founded Sophia on bedrock mercy values stemming from a devotion to serving women and children who were not born into privilege. In nearly 20 years, we've expanded those foundational roots from wanting to be a safe space that affirms girls from low-income families to being a school built on a set of guiding principles.

[00:06:24] And these principles include teaching through a social justice lens, enacting social justice principles in our day-to-day interactions, being student centered and gender responsive, having an intellectually engaging and holistic curriculum, cultivating community leadership and in gendering lifelong learning.

[00:06:43] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:06:43] Thank you, Olivia. Uh, Esperanza, we exist in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Lawrence is a historic city in Northeast, Massachusetts. It has always been an immigrant city and is an immigrant city to this day. It's a low-income city and one of the [00:07:00] things about our founding that is interesting is that our neighboring town, Andover, one of our neighborhood towns, um, is a, is an upper middle-class community.

[00:07:09] And when Esperanza was founded, Lawrence and Andover actually had the biggest wealth discrepancy out of any two neighboring towns in America. And so, we are an Episcopal school and so in a episcopal church, Grace Christ church in Andover Mass and Grace Church in Lawrence came together and said, What can we do for the community of Lawrence, um, and together with community leaders, with parents, from, from Lawrence, with many folks who are involved in change in the city, they had several town hall meetings.

[00:07:39] And one of the things that derived from those meetings was the need for an all-girls school, independent school. And that is how Esperanza was founded. Very much rooted in the social justice values of the Episcopal tradition. Um, and we still have a very strong relationship with both Grace Church, which is where the school is housed and Christ church in [00:08:00] Andover

[00:08:01] **Olivia Haas:** [00:08:00] Since your two schools were both founded to address student learning that was not being met at other schools, how does your unique curriculum meet your students where they are. Jadi, [00:08:09] would you like to start?

[00:08:11] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:08:11] Sure. Um, so one of the things that I love about the academic program at Esperanza is that our students' interests and identities as girls of color really determine how it would work as an independent school, we are free to send to their strengths, you know, while we use common core and other national standards as guides.

[00:08:28] So sure where students are building critical skills, especially around reading and writing, we can teach and learn however best serves our students. In particular, many of our kids are incredible at debating, performing, creating metaphors, imagining stories and questioning the entrenched social structures around us.

[00:08:46] So we're constantly building a program that allows them to lean into these strengths and use them to develop new ones. And in essence, you know at Esperanza, the way that we think about it is our academic program is high challenge, high support and high [00:09:00] joy.

[00:09:00] **Maura Farrell:** [00:09:00] I love that, high challenge, high support and high joy that's fabulous. I hear a lot of similarities between Esperanza and Sophia. There are numerous ways that we meet our students, where they are through our curriculum and through our pedagogy, a couple of unique things that we do that particularly meet the students where they are: In a program, we call gender studies, um, which every student completes in the seventh and eighth grades.

[00:09:29] So seventh graders take a course called girls coalition, which is discussion and project based. And over the course of a year, they explore their own identities as they define them and learn how identity is shaped by perceptions, by media, by society and vice versa. And from there, we'll explore the evolution of feminism and its intersection with other social justice movements and problems.

[00:09:53] And finally, um, we apply that learning to an external view of the world and the students begin to [00:10:00] identify problems in their communities that they may be passionate

about working on. And then in eighth grade, um, students take a course called the justice and gender seminar where identity work continues with a view beyond the individual, to the family and the community.

[00:10:15] And students engage in work around action, civics, learning how to advocate for issues by actually doing it. And then as a class. they choose an issue or a problem, and they take it on, they study it in depth, which includes interviewing and questioning those who are working on the, on the issue in advocacy roles or leadership roles in government.

[00:10:36] And they develop their own strategies and their own plans for solutions. So, the issues emerge from the interest of the students and there's a wide array of things that they want to advocate on. And in a normal year, seminar and social studies culminate in a civil rights trip to Georgia and Alabama, where the eighth graders meet leaders from, um, the civil rights movements of the [00:11:00] 1960s and visit historic sites.

[00:11:03] So we're working on connecting our students' passions to the past and the opportunities that they have for the future.

[00:11:10] **Olivia Haas:** [00:11:10] Maura, this is a beautiful segue into what I wanted to talk about next. I shared earlier a brief definition of restorative justice, which on the surface sounds like a relatively simple concept, but in actuality, there are many complex layers to this work.

[00:11:25] So what does restorative justice look like at both of your schools?

[00:11:29] **Maura Farrell:** [00:11:29] So we are early in our adoption of restorative justice at Sophia Academy. We started last year when our, um, new, uh, Dean of students went through training and restorative practice. Um, and I was interested in researching restorative justice as a possible approach to, to simply to discipline it Sophia. Because its underlying principles aligned so well with our social justice mission. The idea that we could replace traditional discipline policies really appealed to me that [00:12:00] we could align our policies with student agency and help them build skill in relationships and embrace trust, be trusted.

[00:12:08] And have positive experiences of redemption and expression and you're right, It is deceptively simple and a paradigm shift, as you said earlier, because in this model, everyone has

to opt in and there has to be a long-term commitment to change. So, after our Dean was trained, she and our director of student support began to experiment with the practices with some students.

[00:12:33] And it was really well received. So, this year we're working with the Youth Restoration Project here in Providence to train all of our faculty and staff in restorative practice, concepts and protocols. Uh, later this year, um, Youth Restoration Project will propose an implementation plan for Sophia based on input that they've received from students, parents, faculty and staff, and our board.

[00:12:59] Um, [00:13:00] I'm keen to try to apply it to student policy first. Our ideas to merge the academic, social, emotional support and discipline procedures, so they're unified and driven by a core purpose to draw forth our student's agency and approach relationships and community as a laboratory that provides a safe place for students to experiment and make mistakes, learn and repair.

[00:13:24] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:13:24] Yeah Maura. I love hearing the work that you all are doing at Sophie Academy. And there's so many parallels. I echo's so much of the sentiment and the philosophy that you're talking about implementing at the school and even the trajectory in which it has been implemented at a school is really similar to how we, um, have experienced it at, at Esperanza.

[00:13:42] You know, essentially, we had one of our longstanding teachers, um an English teacher who was interested in restorative justice and saw a program at Suffolk University and said, you know, can I get this training um, and I said, sure, it sounds awesome. And she did and came back really excited about what it could mean for our school, you know?

[00:13:59] And I [00:14:00] think that for us, we, um, we decided to take the approach of jumping right into it. And part of it is because I think for many of the folks at our school, um, who really believe in social justice, who really believe in equity and who really believe in black and brown girl joy and the importance of that, we felt like there was no time to waste and to jump into a new system, um, that can honor so many of our girls strengths, but also provide a space of trust,

community building and healing i would say, because I think therefore lot of [00:14:31] Urban schools and high need communities. They fall victim to these really punitive discipline systems that cause a lot of harm to our kids. What Bettina Love often refers to as, you know, spirit violence. And I think that that is historically true in a lot of communities like ours. Um, and our students are the ones that are really facing the repercussions of that.

[00:14:52] And so, we wanted to do something different than a discipline system that, you know, really controlled our, our girls [00:15:00] or silence them and, and, um, and caused harm. And so, when our English teacher had this training, she came back and said, this is what it could look like and I will say that we weren't necessarily sure what it would look like at the school.

[00:15:14] We knew what we didn't want to do and we had a sense of what we wanted to do. And so, for a year it was messy. Um, because we essentially were like, we're not going to commit to what we used to do. Um, we're going to commit to restorative justice, but we didn't know exactly what that looked like. And so, it was a year of messiness and it will say that I think that for a lot of our faculty and staff, that was okay because we knew the harm that was not being done.

[00:15:37] Um, it meant extra work on faculty and staff, as we try to figure out what the new ethos of the school looked like. But what we did last year was, in January, uh, I canceled school for three days and I brought in the Suffolk University Center for restorative justice to fully train our full faculty and staff.

[00:15:56] And so we did intensive training from 08:30 to 3:30 of everyone from development to the business office, to the academic team. And I thought that was really critically important as Maura was saying, you need full buy-in from folks. And at that point, I think what we found was that we did and, you know, we had a faculty and staff that was hungry for this change and, you know, the soil was ready for it, so to speak.

[00:16:20] And so we had that training and we started really thinking about these restorative practices. And the practice is really simple, right? It's about censoring humanity, It's about

challenging your own bias and it's about doing the extra work, um, to make sure that students really truly feel seen, heard, respected and loved in your school.

[00:16:41] I think that in essence, at Esperanza, what we talk about really, and what we practice is transformative justice, right? And restorative practice is a tool of that. What we're talking about is kind of censoring humanity in our work. Um, in the way that we look at students and work with students and the way that we [00:17:00] develop curriculum in the way that we work with our alumni and think about them.

[00:17:04] Um, it's just, it's, it's about transformative justice, and it's about, you know, a sense of liberation to education, particularly because we're working with a community that, um, you know, that systemic oppression, systemic challenges are there are constantly facing those hurdles.

[00:17:20] **Olivia Haas:** [00:17:20] So Maura, Jadi really touched upon in his answer there, why restorative practices and social justice are so critical for the students and families being served at Esperanza. I would love to hear from you a little bit, your perspective on that at Sophia Academy and what does the long-term impact hopefully look like for you?

[00:17:40] **Maura Farrell:** [00:17:40] Uh, thanks. Yeah. Um, Jadi, that was an amazing, um, testament. Thank you for, for everything that you said. I think I couldn't have; I could not have said it better.

[00:17:51] And I think that, um, the only thing I would add is that when we think back to our own experiences in middle school and I'm, you know, [00:18:00] Well beyond middle school at this stage of my life, but it's still so vivid in my memory and that internalization of, of identity, um, is really what happens at this age. So, um, I think, you know, for, for, um, young adolescents who are in just such an important moment in their intellectual and emotional, social and physical development, they [00:18:24] they need affirmation they need spaces to develop self-awareness, they need autonomy and a sense of their own competence and they need belonging and relationships and to develop and express their own sense of justice and fairness.

And we know that peers are so important at this age, but also that adults are powerfully influential in ways we might not immediately see, but it comes to play, you know, maybe weeks, months, or years [00:18:51] down the road. Um, so I think that, you know, in the short and long-term is about just, yeah, having a [00:19:00] community of humans who are developing together and how do you want that to play out? What do you want it to look like? Um, so I think, um, I would say that it's, uh, the paradigm shift is moving away from it's part of the move away from the quote unquote factory model of schooling, which is based on mass production and efficiency and leaning into relationships.

[00:19:25] **Olivia Haas:** [00:19:25] Jadi, a unique element of Esperanza's restorative work is music therapy. Can you share a little bit about why you chose to incorporate this into your programming?

[00:19:34] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:19:34] We love our music therapy program at our school. Um, music, you know, is essential to the experience of many communities of color, particularly land next to households. Music plays a really critical role in the experience of most folk's upbringing in annex households, my upbringing is no exception. And so, our music therapist, she is Atlantic's woman from Texas and I would [00:20:00] say she is, she's brilliant at this work and I think one of the things that happens is not only clinically, that she understands the work, culturally, she really understands the students.

[00:20:09] And she helps them identify how their family is already using therapy, right. So, you know what song mom plays when she's mad at dad? right. You know, a song that may play if she's feeling lonely. And these are ways that we use music to reflect emotions. That is also what we're seeing through self-regulation, emotional expression, developing agency, um, healthy coping mechanisms skills and processing trauma.

[00:20:33] And so I think that it's falls again and the transformative justice kind of umbrella, because what we're saying is let's identify a norm within the culture to provide this therapeutic program, therapy and support is strength based because we're saying, we know that this culture loves music, we know that they love storytelling [00:20:54] we know that it's an oral culture. So why can't a therapeutic program be based on that.

[00:20:59] **Olivia Haas:** [00:20:59] Jadi just [00:21:00] provided a really tangible example of how incorporating music therapy into Esperanza's restorative work is having an impact on students. I'd love for each of you to provide more tangible anecdotes of how you've seen restorative practices impact your students, and also your faculty and staff.

[00:21:17] **Maura Farrell:** [00:21:17] So, as I mentioned, it's early days at Sophia with restorative practice and restorative justice. The most tangible success story is that so our sixth graders were in a regular weekly circles with our Dean of students and Director of student support last year, um, processing social dynamics that were happening both inside of school and outside of school, some of it happening over social media and they really internalize these processes [00:21:47] so well that they began to ask for circles when the dynamics in their class began to overwhelm them. So, they recognize the power of the process and they noticed when they needed it and then they, they would come to Mrs April, Mrs Rose, we [00:22:00] need a circle, we need a circle. Um, and this year we're hearing from their parents who saw the positive change that, um, happened after we introduced the circles last year.

[00:22:10] So they're now coming forward to share dynamics that they're seeing among the students, which aren't always visible to us, especially right now, because we're in a hybrid situation at Sophia where we have some students in school and some students not. And so, the parents are sort of partnering with us now and saying, our kids need a circle. [00:22:31] You know, we're starting to see that buy-in, um, that is so important. And so that's, that's the most tangible, um, the tangible success story

[00:22:41] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:22:41] I love this question because I think that you sometimes are surprised by the positive ways in which circle impacts students or classes maybe because it's not prescribed you don't say we're going to have the circle for this thing. [00:22:55] You know, that's tangible results. And one example was that last [00:23:00] year we had some turnover in the math department and there were, there were two folks that had transitioned out of the math class and two teachers in one year. And so, so talk to the students about transition and to make sure that they were not impacted or at least that we were understanding the impact of the transitions on them.

[00:23:19] We had a circle practice. I remember with the fifth grade, we sat down with them and we had prompts around transition and they went around and talked about what it felt like to have a community member leave abruptly, um, or leave after a certain amount of time when you've built a relationship with them.

[00:23:37] And what that feeling is like, which I think is a really critical thing to talk to kids about in general. And what we saw with the fifth grade was they had these beautiful, honest answers around how it felt. And then they decided by the end of the circle that they wanted to write a song. And this is, this was the kind of intersection between um, restorative justice and music therapy. So, they wanted to write a [00:24:00] song for the math teacher to wish him well and say, thank you for being a part of our community. And they did, and they performed the song, they recorded it and they sent it to the math teacher. And again, I think like it's one of those things where like, it feels warm and fuzzy, but it feels like unpack, like what's happening there for a ten-year-old to have such a healthy moment of processing of really complicated emotion and building the tools to deal with this really complicated, you know, relational aspect that will forever be a part of their lives. Transitions will be a part of their lives one way or another, but at a young age, they're learning that they should like check in with themselves when there is a transition.

[00:24:39] **Olivia Haas:** [00:24:39] So I could listen to both of you talk about this work all day, but I think I'm going to force us to switch gears a little bit here. To talk about the intersection of gender, race, culture, and socioeconomics, and how they impact your school communities. Jadi how does community cultural wealth inform Esperanza's programs and [00:25:00] pedagogy?

[00:25:01] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:25:01] I mean, it is our program, right? And I think we're making the explicit commitment to saying we are not going to separate these things. We can ignore the intersectionality of identity in the work that we're doing, or else we're doing a service to both our students and our families. And so, you know, when we talk about cultural capital, again, we try to do the strength-based approach into the, in our work.

[00:25:25] And an example of that is navigational capital, meaning that your family, and you have been able to navigate different cultures with grace and ease. You are great at it. You know, that

there is nothing of be in denial about how challenging and independent school education will be and predominant white spaces, but it has all sorts of say, you will be able to navigate many aspects, but you have this really amazing skillset of navigation that has been passed down from generation to generation.

[00:25:55] You know, I'll also say, if you come from a culture with a storytelling tradition, [00:26:00] then you have experience with memorization and presentation skills. If your culture is highly relational, then you come from a background that values building trust and reliable networks. So, part of our job as educators is to say, all right, what are the cultural norms?

[00:26:15] What are the assets? what are the strengths that each student is bringing to the table? So often in this work, particularly with the low-income communities with girls, women of color, folks come from a deficiency mindset. And what we're trying to do is the complete opposite not only with these kinds of tangible skills that I just named, but also with this idea of love, joy, fun.

[00:26:39] And I think that the intersectionality of gender race, play a critical part in that, because we know that black girl joy is something that is often a threat, you know, a child, a young African-American girl who is 10 or 11 and is very vocal, processes really fast and in other identity oftentimes can be said, you know, she's going to be an amazing lawyer or what a Congress [00:27:00] woman.

[00:27:00] And if folks haven't challenged their own implicit bias, they can look at that child as a threat for many reasons. And that message is indirectly received by that child and they may quiet down that skill set that they already have inherently. If you don't look at it from a strengths-based place, if you don't look at what is this amazing thing that this child can already do, because they come from these beautiful cultures with tons of depth, you're slowly taking that stuff away and it's, and it's not fair because the child has this inherent brilliance.

[00:27:31] And you may be teaching the child to move away from the culture. And so, I always say that like our number one goal is for our girls to graduate from Esperanza comfortable in their own skin.

[00:27:41] **Olivia Haas:** [00:27:41] So Maura, I know that at Sophia Academy, being gender responsive with an emphasis in cultural competency is among the school's guiding principles. Can you please expand on what this looks like at your school?

[00:27:52] **Maura Farrell:** [00:27:52] You know, I think it could be easy for a school like ours to think we're further along than, uh, predominantly white [00:28:00] schools and being culturally competent. And in some ways, we are, because we affirm our girls. It's, it's baked in that we affirm our girls [00:28:07] and, but at the same time, we are learning all the time and that's really key that the adults in the community are learning all the time. And I just learned something from Jadi because I had never heard the term navigational capital before and it relates right to an example that, that I'll give you.

We used to talk about code switching as something that our students learn at Sophia and [00:28:30] perhaps, this was a benign idea even a year or two ago that our students would leave us with the ability to assimilate into other cultures and communities. And it was part of our quote unquote portrait of the Sophia graduate, which we looked at this summer and we had a visceral reaction to those words, code switching and to the idea that we would in any way, shape or form actively promote or guide our students to put on masks when they enter new communities.

[00:28:57] And. We want students certainly [00:29:00] to understand how to interact and communicate with others who are different to understand and to be understood. We want them to know what it is to enter a professional environment, to engage in civil discourse, to develop relationships but we want them to maintain their authenticity and see themselves as rightfully belonging as their full selves.

[00:29:20] So cultural competency and gender responsiveness are dynamic and what's important for us is to learn, unlearn and relearn while we're holding onto our core. So, I'm going to take that term navigational capital and go back to my team and say, let's look at this idea because I think we were trying to get at something that gets at the authenticity of our, of our students and we were missing the boat.

[00:29:47] **Olivia Haas:** [00:29:47] So Jadi, in previous conversations, I've heard you use the term "wrap around education". And when you talk about supporting students through their educational journey, can you explain to our listeners what this means at Esperanza?

[00:30:00] [00:30:00] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:30:00] I think that, you know, it touches on a lot of what both Maura and I have been talking about with the restorative justice, piece with families, thinking about cultural context, historical context, and, and the, as for Esperanza, we have this 12 year commitment to our students or seeing them through high school and college.

[00:30:18] And I think in essence, our students in order to come to Esperanza, your family has to qualify for free and reduced lunch and so we are directly fighting against poverty. You know, I've often said like, this is not a school in which students will check their culture at the door, nor is it a school where the kids day begins at 07:30 when they come to school.

[00:30:42] And there's so many stories and challenges and triumphs connected to their child's success throughout Esperanza in high school and college. And part of our job is to be able to think about like, what are all the different ways in which we can support a student and family so that we can [00:31:00] actually support a child in disputing or ending generational poverty in their homes.

[00:31:06] And so part of our job, when I think about wrap around education, it's not only supporting the kid in high school as they navigate PWI or supporting the first-generation college students through our loan literacy so they know what kind of loans they're taking out so that they don't graduate college, you know, burdened by massive loan debt, is also thinking about like, how can we support the family?

[00:31:28] You know, we have one parent that we're working with, who we're setting up with that for some first-time home buyer course. I wish I could do that for all parents, but we're doing it with one parent right now, but let's just say that if we are actually supporting our students, the best way to do it is to think about all those other indicators and factors that are making it really challenging for the families to kind of have upward mobility.

[00:31:54] I think there are students who will end generational poverty for families, I think that's a lot to put on a [00:32:00] child. And I think that as an institution, our job is to kind of broaden our scope a little bit, think about the other kinds of tentacles of poverty and try to address them head on.

[00:32:12] **Olivia Haas:** [00:32:12] Maura, I know that Sophia Academy has really similar philosophy to what Jadi just shared, that you're not just supporting your students while they're on your campus and while they are Sofia students. So, what does this look like for you?

[00:32:27] **Maura Farrell:** [00:32:27] This idea of being a hub where you can provide a comprehensive set of services for families is something that we would love to be able to do too, if not for resources. But I think part of the reason that we think it would be very powerful is because there's a trust in our community.

[00:32:44] And I would imagine that it's the same for you, Jadi, at Esperanza, that they're the families we have cousins, sisters, nieces. We have our first daughter of an alum this year so there's a, there's a family feeling to the school that I think [00:33:00] could be built upon to create those kinds of, um, Uh, comprehensive programs.

[00:33:06] Um, we do some unique things for our graduates. Um, one of which is a program that we partnered with Brown University on and, uh, it's for our junior, our graduates who are juniors and seniors in high school. And it's a mentoring program, um, where they, um, meet with Brown undergraduates, um, mostly first-generation young women of color.

[00:33:30] And so they learn what their undergraduate career could look like by having this experience with these young women, they go to some of the college process with them as mentors. And then, um, some of them actually get internships as a result of participating in this program. So that's something that, that we have been doing for quite some time.

[00:33:50] And this year we started an internship program at Sophia, in partnership with AmeriCorps, uh, we call it Sophia Corp. Um, and we, so we have young [00:34:00] people in our classrooms as assistance, tutors and mentors, um, in their learning kind of the Sophia way and preparing for their own careers and education or youth development [00:34:10] and we're

thrilled that four of the five Sophia Corp members at Sophia this year are graduates of Sophia Academy. So, we feel like it's a legacy. We also work with the college crusade here in Rhode Island, which is a 30-year-old organization that works with students starting in sixth grade through their senior year of college, providing different types of preparation and counseling.

[00:34:31] And we have someone on staff who wants to build more graduate support programs beyond that, but that's where we are now. Um, but I think the getting back to the trust issue, what we see is just the informal, right? The, the, the students coming back to see their teachers and get help with math or, um, talk through what it's, what kind of transition they're having to high school or college? That's, there's a lot to build on there, I guess is what I would say.

[00:34:57] **Olivia Haas:** [00:34:57] So as you both follow the two trajectory of your graduates, how are you defining success? And would you be willing to share an example of a success story?

[00:35:08] **Maura Farrell:** [00:35:08] Sure, so we, we know that higher education is the pathway out of poverty for first-generation students so our goal is that our graduates will go on to college. Um, and we did a survey of our alumni last year, uh, 70% said they're in the first generation in their family to go directly from high school to college without a gap and 70% also said they were pursuing, are planning to pursue graduate studies. So that feels like a success story to me. And, um, we have students who are doing such interesting things, such as one, who wants to marry her pursuit of a computer science degree with her passion, for creating programs that build up the confidence and self-love among girls of color. She's a sophomore in college now and got a seed grant at her university to pursue this idea.

[00:35:56] But you know, ultimately success for us is that each graduate [00:36:00] Is following the pathway she chooses to follow and is engaged in the community and is fulfilled in relationships and career. And we hear over and over that Sophia was where our graduates found themselves and understood and embraced their identities and where their passion for science and engineering or social justice or math or writing was ignited.

And there are different ways to succeed and different ways that you can have and design your life. And if they are feeling that agency to do that for themselves, then I, I feel like we've succeeded.

[00:36:34] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:36:34] That's beautiful Maura. I, you know, I agree wholeheartedly with that piece. Uh, but you know, we had a student who just recently graduated from college, became part of a biotech startup at an early time. Now that biotech startup is doing amazing and this child is doing amazing and we'll be able to support the families and really, um, healthy ways. And. That's a beautiful thing to see, you know, we're lottery based.

[00:36:55] So I think that the idea of a prescribed kind of success [00:37:00] criteria is, is challenging for us because students come to us with really a range of experiences and a range of, um, potential. And so, what success looks like for one student will just be vastly different and what it may look like for another. We have a student who graduated from Holy Cross, went abroad for some time to Peru, had a beautiful experience, came back and decided to work in the city of Lawrence and is working in the mayor's office.

[00:37:25] You know, that has his own beauty as well. And then I think about a student that we have at a, you know, predominantly white elite boarding school in New England, who recently had really complicated kind of race situation happened, uh, with a roommate. And that child came back to us during one of her breaks and say, here's what happened.

[00:37:44] I need help navigating this. Like that's a success story to me because it shows that the school is developing a relationship with students, that they feel comfortable coming back to have these really hard conversations, but they're also asking for the skills to navigate them. And they're not internalizing the implicit [00:38:00] messages and the explicit messages in those really unfortunate situations in their schools.

[00:38:05] I think that's a success story as well. And so, it all depends on the context of the child and the family and, you know, think about a parent and a child who in the summer, mom was going through really just an awful challenging situation through the COVID crisis and mom and child were having a difficult time with their relationship and they had music therapy together,

and that was wildly successful.[00:38:31] And so for us again, it's like, I think for kids of color, for girls of color and I mentioned this before, I think being comfortable in your own skin is critical and I want them to be successful and I want them to be successful in what they deem, success for themselves.

[00:38:52] **Olivia Haas:** [00:38:52] Thank you both so much for your candor and honesty throughout our conversation. So, to bring things to a close, what are some things you've learned [00:39:00] through your work that you would love to see incorporated into more schools? What do you dream the future of education could look like for girls and specifically for girls of color?

[00:39:10] **Maura Farrell:** [00:39:10] You know, a couple of weeks ago, one of our eighth graders sat on a panel at a women's leadership conference with other young women here in Providence and she was the youngest on the panel, completely confident, totally unapologetic in her opinions, which she presented with passion, but also just factual support. She had, she had it all down and you could see the joy taking over on her face as she became more and more comfortable in the conversation.

[00:39:36] And at one point, of the other panelists, who's a college freshman said to her, wow, you give me hope for the future and you know, this eighth grader came to us with a sense of herself. She came to us with a curious nature and critical thinking skills and confidence, but I know we've done right by her because we've respected that and we've made sure she knows that she's seen and she's heard.

[00:39:59] So that's the [00:40:00] ultimate dream for every child to have a middle school experience that respects their identity and culture and challenges them in a student centered curriculum and ignites their thirst to, to continue learning and trust them, to learn and develop their own credibility, you know, we need this for the future of this country.

[00:40:19] It's three concrete things that we do at Sophia that other schools might learn from. One is we're small and while that can be problematic, sometimes socially, I think our small size combined with the grade levels, five through eight, is key to creating that powerful experience for each student. Each student is known, [00:40:40] each student is met where they are, each

student is taught by the same teachers for all four years, for the most part. So, we can really partner with their families too. Um, the second is experiential learning expeditions like the civil rights trip, and we, we take them to a farm for a week in, um, fifth and sixth grade.

[00:40:58] We, we climb [00:41:00] Mount Monadnock with them. So, we, we get them out of their comfort zones and they prove to themselves what they can do, um, action, civics, community advocacy and seminar learning science by doing science. Um, so pushing them to engage. And then the third is partnership, we have a very small staff and we're mighty, but we don't know everything and we can't do everything.

[00:41:24] So we've been able to build out our program through partnerships with. Organizations that bring different strengths and competencies to us. So, our health program is delivered by a Sojourner House, our music program by the Rhode Island, Philharmonic Music School, college crusade which I mentioned earlier, supports our guidance counseling center for resilience, doing mindfulness, uh, with our students and we, um, partner with the US Taekwondo complex here in Cranston, Rhode Island to do our [00:41:56] Phys-ed programs. So, these partnerships allow us [00:42:00] to extend our program to really great levels of enrichment and it's good for the partners too.

[00:42:05] **Jadi Taveras:** [00:42:05] And again, I think there's so much alignment between our schools, I agree with everything that you just said, I will add to that, I think it depends on the schools that we're talking about [00:42:15] right. I think what urban schools in high-need communities need to do might be different than I think, you know, um, some of the more elite, predominantly white independent schools, I think for those schools, the independent schools, I would hope that folks were start asking the question, whose norms are we practicing?

[00:42:33] And where do they live in this space, until you start unpacking that, you are now building inclusive communities, because there are so many ways that directly and indirectly, the dominant culture's norms live in a community. And I think you have to start asking that question. And even before that, I think folks really have to practice courage.

[00:42:54] I think school communities, individuals, and as a collective need to have courage [00:43:00] and asking ourselves, you know, what are my biases and what are our institutional biases and how do we put in place the systems that are going to help us illuminate our blind spots? There's this thing we say Esperanza: [00:43:12] We want to create the world we wish to see while preparing our students for the world, they're going to inherit. And I think that that's, you have to have this dual reality, right? I, if we at Esperanza tell our kids, here, we're going to develop a school system in which you learn how to navigate the schools in some ways, [00:43:27] that's great because they're going to need to learn how to navigate those spaces, but we can't do it at the expense or the cost of demonstrating what it should look like. So, I would encourage schools, particularly in urban communities to ask that question. I would love to see schools, particularly those in our communities, but everywhere really center black and brown girl joy in their programs.

[00:43:53] **Olivia Haas:** [00:43:53] Maura and Jadi, as I anticipated, this has been a really enlightening and fascinating conversation. Thank you [00:44:00] so much. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today. Stay current on the latest NCGS offerings, resources and research by subscribing to The Coalition Connection Newsletter [00:44:12] found in the News section at ncgs.org and be sure to follow us on Twitter at GIRLS SCHOOLS. Thank you for listening, PEP Talks is produced by the National Coalition of Girls' Schools: The leading advocate for girls' schools, connecting and collaborating globally with individuals, schools, and organizations dedicated to educating and empowering girls.