



COVID-19, Remote Learning, and the Need for Marquette University Peace Works

Marquette University Center for Peacemaking

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Peace Works At-A-Glance

- Peace Works aims to provide students with skills to employ nonviolent communication and select prosocial, peaceful ways of building relationships with others.
- Peace Works aligns with each school's mission to support a school culture of nonviolence through the reduction of youth violence.
- The Peace Works curriculum—comprised of 30 different lessons—includes topics on thought-feeling behavior, grounding techniques, perspective taking, values, and empathy.
- Peace Works engages with students, teachers, administrators, and families to create a system that empowers students to heal and transform communities harmed by violence, poverty, and injustice.

Overview

In mid-March 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, Milwaukee schools shifted to virtual learning. Following this abrupt change, students and families, including those where Marquette University Peace Works is offered, anxiously awaited further announcements as schools rushed to implement distance learning and teachers hurriedly developed virtual classrooms.

There was justifiable concern that social isolation and additional stresses of the pandemic and school closures would disproportionately harm already vulnerable students. This was an especially acute concern of Peace Works partner schools because many of their students are considered vulnerable. Furthermore, these challenges will likely impact young people's mental health and social and emotional development long after the pandemic ends.

Peace Works, a sustainable peace education program implemented in partnership with several public and private schools in Milwaukee, helps students develop social-emotional skills such as resiliency and self-care, which are central to student success. Given Peace Works' established relationship with students and schools, the Peace Works team was uniquely positioned to help support the transition from traditional to virtual learning. The Peace Works team worked closely with partner schools throughout the difficult transition to ensure continued delivery of the Peace Works curriculum and relationship-building with students and families.

Over the past several months, Peace Works provided practical ways for students, families, and educators to cope with heightened challenges introduced or magnified by the pandemic. With the support of the Marquette University President's Challenge grant, Peace Works is also building a toolkit to help teachers support student social, emotional, and mental health as they continue to navigate everyday challenges during the pandemic and prepare for potential long-term ramifications.

This paper examines the importance of Peace Works as well as its flexibility and adaptability. This includes the Peace Works team re-imagining the program's traditional content delivery model and adapting it to meet the needs of students, staff, and families. Peace Works continues to develop new and creative ways of connecting with students, families, and educators.



Peace Works Instruction Models

Peace Works draws on the CDC’s socio-ecological model in offering program components that pursue overlapping strategies of violence prevention (CDC n.d.; Dahlberg 2005). It is important that what students learn in Peace Works is practiced, supported, and reinforced on multiple levels.

- On the individual level, students develop social-emotional skills and learn how to resolve conflict through classroom instruction.
- On the relationship level, classroom activities engage students with their peers; and take-home activities engage students with their families.
- On the community level, students are part of a class, grade, and/or entire school that models pro-social behaviors. Also, Peace Works consults with schools to implement alternative/restorative disciplinary practices.

Peace Works collaborates with each partner school to identify needs, understand the impact of violence in their school community, and develop a program implementation plan. At the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, Peace Works was implemented using two models.

The **classroom instruction** model consists of Peace Works staff visiting schools at scheduled times to lead instruction to a primary classroom. Students experience Peace Works in the same environment as their other classes, and the primary classroom teacher shadows the lead Peace Works instructor. The goal of this model is to enhance each student’s education through complementary instruction. This is usually during regular school hours but can also be arranged as an organized, after-school program.

The **integrated programming** model includes delivery of Peace Works lessons plus additional therapeutic services such as art, music, drum and dance, and yoga. Students experience Peace Works in a small group setting for up to a semester, with activities taking place in an environment separate from their traditional school. Peace Works instructors are on-site the entire day and also engage with parents and guardians. The goal of this model is for each student to transition back to their traditional school after demonstrating growth.

Students participating in Peace Works across both models in 2019-2020 were split between grade, middle, and high school.

	Classroom Instruction	Integrated Programming
Staff	Part-time; visit school during weekly lesson times	Full-time; always on-site
Additional features	Peer mediation program (optional) Take home activities	Individual, family, and group psychotherapy Art, yoga, and music therapy
Implementation Sites (2019-20)	Messmer St. Mary, Messmer St. Rose, Golda Meir, Nativity Jesuit, St. Joan Antida, and Notre Dame Schools of Milwaukee (after school program).	Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) Success Center program

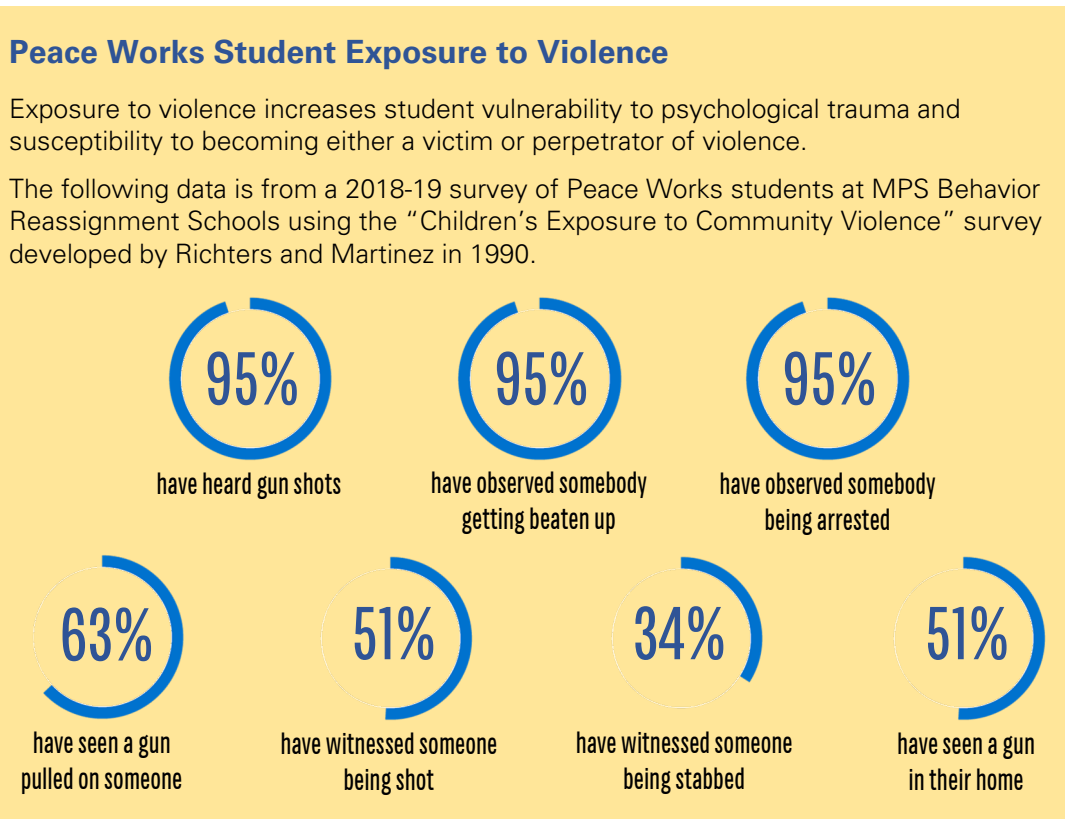


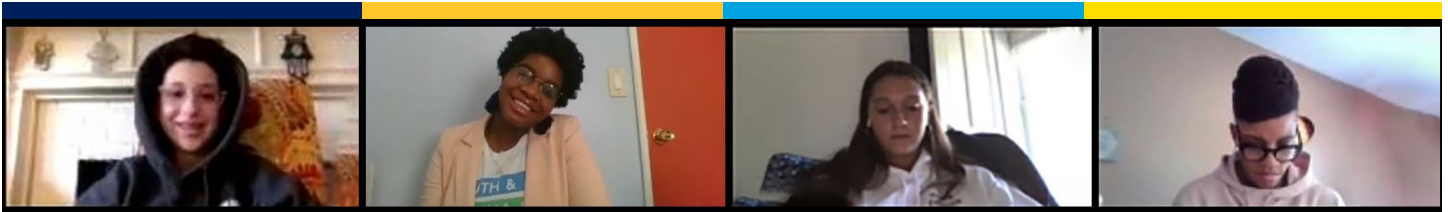
The Need for Peace Works During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Even before the pandemic, youth in Milwaukee’s low-income communities experienced high rates of poverty, academic failure, and violence. Many Peace Works students were already considered vulnerable due to their family income level and/or exposure to violence (see “Peace Works Student Exposure to Violence” figure below).

The pandemic and resulting disruptions to education and daily routines introduced additional socio-emotional challenges to young people’s lives—such as social isolation, changes in expectations, and financial and health-related stress. Furthermore, the pandemic disproportionately impacted communities of color (most Peace Works students identified as African American or Hispanic/Latino).

Peace Works offered students practical ways to deal with challenging situations by providing a safe and supportive environment to practice skills that translate into respectful behavior, positive communication, and a sense of hope and self-worth.





COVID-19 Pandemic Spurs Transition to Remote Learning

Before the pandemic, Peace Works was already providing instruction focused on developing social and emotional skills among youth. Because of this, Peace Works was uniquely positioned to respond to changing needs brought about by the pandemic.

There were three key success factors behind how Peace Works effectively adapted after the onset of the pandemic to address existing and emerging needs of students, families, and schools. Each of these factors—understanding school needs, filling gaps and providing resources, and launching the Peace Works virtual classroom—are detailed below.

In many instances, our responses to evolving needs varied based on the instructional model in use.

Understanding School Needs

During the first week of virtual learning, Peace Works staff recognized the need to act quickly and compassionately. The staff took steps to ensure the continuation of Peace Works while also demonstrating Peace Works' flexibility which allowed for new and creative ways to support students, families, and schools.

According to the Peace Works program coordinator, "The most important thing is that even before COVID-19, we had established relationships with schools, students, and families...That, plus meeting right away and getting on video calls, helped us figure out what was needed."

The MPS Success Center, where Peace Works provides integrated programming and assumes more of a leadership role, had different needs. During the first week, Peace Works staff connected with each family. This ensured students and families that services, resources,

and materials would be available and helped ease the minds of students and families.

Peace Works staff also reached out to each partner organization to better understand their capacity and flexibility in providing individual, family, and group psychotherapy, as well as art, yoga, and music therapy. As one staff member pointed out, "We collaborated closely with our partners, our role expanded as we took a leadership position to make sure students received all the support they needed."

Perhaps the most important lesson learned was that Peace Works could assist students and families simply by being present. This realization crystalized the value of Peace Works in the mind of one team member: "Peace Works truly helped kids that were struggling emotionally. There was a positivity that exists far beyond the curriculum. A chance for students to be themselves. Students could be themselves. They could just *be*."

Filling Gaps and Providing Resources

The Peace Works team also recognized that families needed access to specific resources if there was going to be a successful transition to remote learning. To provide families with necessary resources, Peace Works leveraged school partnerships to secure funding from The Greater Milwaukee Foundation's MKE Responds initiative and Congregation of St. Joseph Generous Promise Fund.

With the Milwaukee Responds funding, Peace Works provided support to over 500 students and families. Items distributed in care packages included facemasks, headphones, games, puzzles, reading books, and summer bridge books. Students at the MPS Success Center also received a family activities journal. Furthermore, Peace Works distributed essential

technology such as Chromebooks and iPads to partner school families.

With the Generous Promise funding, Peace Works provided summer bridge books and family learning packets to partner schools. The family learning packets contained activities to engage families in practicing resilience, building emotional regulation, offering positive affirmation, and performing acts of kindness.

Launching the Peace Works Virtual Classroom

For partners using the classroom instruction model, Peace Works focused on retooling the curriculum into easy-to-digest 30-minute lessons. The curriculum was adapted so teachers could virtually deliver the nonviolence lessons based on the specific needs of their students.

The updated lessons centered on five essential skills: developing resiliency, dealing with stress, managing emotions, maintaining social connectedness, and accessing needed resources during the pandemic. All lessons were designed for teachers to deliver without the direct assistance of Peace Works staff.

At the MPS Success Center, Peace Works provided lessons through Google Classroom while working with partner organizations to support students and families through art and music instruction, yoga, and telehealth delivery of psychological services. Google Classroom allowed Peace Works to provide engaging content for students, helpful resource information for parents, and social meetups for both students and families.

Google Classroom proved invaluable at the MPS Success Center where Peace Works

works with some of MPS' most vulnerable students, many who have experienced trauma and have behavioral and/or mental challenges that impede their academic success. Many MPS Success Center students demonstrate high levels of anxiety, and can be overwhelmed by emotions and behavioral impulses, often resulting in violent or disruptive behaviors. Compounding these issues, many parents are dependent upon the school and social services to help them navigate their child's challenging behaviors.

One parent explained, "Since school has been closed, my son has taught me so much of what he learned...I have to say I wasn't expecting so much from this program but having so much support from the people in it has been such a blessing. It really makes this time go easier. My son has been very blessed to have the people in this program show that no matter what, they are there. I couldn't be any happier with the Success Center. The name itself *truly* speaks out."

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Despite initial challenges students, families, and staff faced during the transition to remote learning, there were unexpected benefits. Peace Works supported students by answering questions, giving advice, checking in, and providing entertainment (i.e., playing a movie and games over video chat).

One team member observed, "We recognized the meaning of Peace Works to students and teachers and school staff. It was so important to have that consistency of Peace Works. It just shows that we are a staple of the school environment. We have our hands in so many different elements of the school culture."

Moving Forward: Academic Year 2020-21 and Beyond

At the onset of the 2020-21 school year, all Peace Works partner schools continued with virtual instruction or a hybrid model. Peace Works continues working with them and looking for ways to innovate.

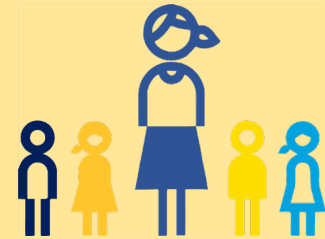
The extent and timeframe of COVID-19 is unknown, but it is clear from previous experience and preliminary studies that the increased challenges to learning, community building in schools, and young people's mental health are lasting. Engaging with schools to support resilience, coping, and mental health while developing lasting, flexible resources, Peace Works is working to respond to community challenges and build a foundation for continued support.

Peace Works faculty research team member Dr. Gabe Velez is working to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on adolescents. Findings indicate that amid the pandemic and its disruptions to daily routines and education, young people confront heightened socio-emotional challenges related to social isolation, changes in expectations, and financial and health-related stress.

The high demand for virtual instruction and connection is likely to continue beyond the pandemic. To address the long-term impacts of the pandemic on young people, Peace Works applied for and received the Marquette University President's Challenge Grant for COVID-19 Response. With this grant, Peace Works is partnering with Notre Dame Schools of Milwaukee (NDSM) to develop a **web-based toolkit** that will advance digital learning and equip teachers with activities to foster resilience, improve social connectivity, and support mental health. NDSM administrators, teachers, parents and students play an active role in developing the toolkit.

Research demonstrates the valuable and central role teachers play in supporting student mental health (see "Teachers as Frontline Responders" sidebar). The toolkit will provide a much-needed resource for teachers to help students and families cope with and manage social, emotional, and mental health challenges during the pandemic and beyond.

When complete, the web-based toolkit (see "Peace Works Teacher Toolkit on pg. 8) will be offered to all Peace Works partner schools. It will also be available to any interested school throughout the country. The Peace Works team will offer coaching and trainings to interested schools as they adapt the toolkit to fit the individual needs of their community.



Teachers as Frontline Responders

As identified in guidelines from such organizations as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, teachers are at the front line when it comes to schools providing the following:

- (1) development of social and emotional competencies,
- (2) prevention of risky behaviors,
- (3) screening for psychiatric disorders,
- (4) provision of early intervention services,
- (5) and increasing access to school-linked treatment services.

Teacher-provided classroom interventions have also shown promise in mitigating negative psychological consequences of trauma in students (e.g., Berger, Pat-Horenczyk, & Gelkopf, 2007; Wolmer, Hamiel, Barchas, Slone, & Laor, 2011).

Other research highlights teacher effectiveness in supporting students in these ways is linked to their feelings of competency and the emotional difficulty of working with trauma (Alisic, 2012; Kos, Richdale, & Hay, 2006).

Peace Works Teacher Toolkit

As schools continue with virtual learning, transition back to in-person instruction, and deal with long-term ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, Peace Works remains committed to providing programming that helps students cope, adapt, and thrive.

Explore the Teacher Toolkit at <https://www.marquette.edu/peacemaking/peace-works-toolkit.php>.

The screenshot shows the website header for the Center for Peacemaking at Marquette University. The header includes the Klingle College of Arts & Sciences logo and navigation links: ABOUT, NEWS AND EVENTS, STUDENTS, FACULTY, INITIATIVES, CONTACT, and DONATE. The main content area features the breadcrumb "Marquette.edu // Center for Peacemaking // PEACE WORKS TOOLKIT: GRATITUDE" and an "Introduction" section. The introduction text states: "Gratitude, an emotion expressing thankfulness, is a vital topic to introduce to students. Studies show that people who express their gratitude regularly are happier and healthier than those who do not do so. As students grow up and face greater challenges, remaining focused on their gratitude can help them navigate obstacles in positive and healthy ways." Below this is a "Grade 6" section with a "Teacher guide" and two bullet points: "Suggested lesson plan (45 min) Fully completed 45-minute lesson plan for public schools." and "Milwaukee Archdiocese religious education options Connecting lesson to Archdiocese Religious Education Curriculum Expectations and Closing". On the right side of the page, there is a photo of students and a "QUICK LINKS" sidebar with links for "PEACE WORKS" (Program overview, Teacher toolkit) and "TOOLKIT TOPICS" (Gratitude).

Peace Works is a program of the Marquette University Center for Peacemaking.

To learn more about Peace Works, visit www.marquette.edu/peace-works



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