L: Robin, can you talk about how RJ is doing, in your experience, right now? You know, the pandemic caused a fair amount of disruption. And we’re kind on the other side of that, but kind of not. It seems like a lot of the problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic are still going on.

R: Thank you for asking that question. As the momentum of RJ work began to really take root around, 2014, 2015, on up to 2019, boom, COVID-19 hit, and we were isolated. For a while, we were out of community. So, when we started being in person with one another again, we came back with some challenges—social, emotional, and mental health challenges—because of the isolation. And, of course, when we see challenging behaviors, we tend to revert to what we've always done, things that we thought worked. The thought was “something's wrong with the children; we have to do something to fix them. And we must do it immediately.” So, instead of really thinking about how we needed to continue with that foundation of restorative justice—which is empowering communities, empowering relationships—we wanted to dismiss these young people because they were disrupting our return to learning. So as a result, there have been systemic challenges with decisions about pushing forward with RJ or cracking down on young people.

However, those who were committed and embedded in the work of RJ saw that we needed to hold onto the reins a little tighter so as not to lose what we built. We saw the importance of continuing, revamping, and mobilizing RJ once again. The fight comes up when people try to go back to the traditional way of approaching harmful behaviors, because they want a quick fix. I don't think we need to go back to where we were, but rather to take this time to imagine something new, to enable students and adults to be in a learning community where they can thrive.

L: Yes, something new. With the world the way it is, we are faced with so much adversity that to create something new becomes even more important. We aren't going to get past all this doing the same things we always did. What's the scenario within your district regarding critical race theory. How does it look on your end and what have you heard from other folks in the field?

R: I've been part of this group called Leaders for Just Schools and we began really looking at the inequities in education, how they show up in our classrooms, and who is impacted by these inequities regarding race and LGBTQ+ issues. Maryland, where I live, is very committed to
diversity, equity, and inclusion. The commitment shows up in our laws, in our policy, and in our practices; it's not just something written down, there are actual "boots on the ground" making this happen. On the state level, Leaders for Just Schools has challenged race-related policies such as dress codes and inequitable discipline practices.

In my particular district, we have an equity office that focuses on how we welcome all young people into the school, how we are ensuring that we are socially and racially equitable within the school community with both students and staff. The specific focus this year is on ensuring Black and Brown boys get what they need to stay in school and succeed. Educators need to go inward and think about how they're perceiving our young Black boys and how their perception contributes to how they respond to behaviors that may be inappropriate. This is something our district has been doing and is continuing to do.

Critical race theory is not a big issue in my school district, but I do sit in solidarity with those educators and other thought partners who are fighting against the book bans and dealing with curriculum controversies about what type of history to teach and how we teach it.

L: Well, I just learned something about Maryland! Does support for this work go all the way to the top and on the state level?

R: Yes, it does.

L: So, Maryland stands as a good example. When you think about support for the work from the bottom all the way to the top, that's the way it should be. It should be system wide.

R: That's not to say we don't have people who disagree with some laws or regulations that will continue to highlight the need for equity and inclusiveness. We still have that, but it's not a big problem because the majority in Maryland are progressive and support centering those people who have been left on the margins for so long.

L: That segues a little bit into another question I had. I read all about activist citizens showing up at school board meetings and shouting and carrying on and wanting more control over what their kids do in school, what they read, what they're taught, et cetera. Are Circles used across the board and in your system?

R: In my system, there are schools that are committed to sitting in Circles with young people, and there are several schools who are intentional about sitting in Circle with the adults, with the staff, to ensure that we're building community with one another. Three campuses in particular are committed to nontraditional programs in programs that service a smaller
population, so it’s easier to navigate school-wide Circles. My school district is very large—it’s about a hundred and ninety-nine schools, so Circles are not happening across the board. It’s only one of me for the whole district. However, I have other thought partners across the district that support me in the work. RJ Partnerships has been one of them.

Getting everyone trained is challenging because I really want to do this work with fidelity. That’s a very common word, but a word that I add to that is integrity. We have to honor where this work comes from, because we know this work is not our own. So, I don't just bring people together, tell them how to do a Circle, and then send them on their way. I train in a way where people can experience how this work touches the heart and allows the heart to connect with the head, so that when they go back to do Circles in their schools, they're just not performing it, they're being the work. I believe in a full three-day or four-day training. That's a little challenging when we're talking about over 25,000 educators. So, the Circle work is happening, and when it's happening with integrity, it's making a difference in the participants' lives.

L: Do parents get an overview of this, or do they ever participate in a Circle?

R: I'm so glad you asked that question. I started this work when I was in the classroom, and I've had parents join the student Circle just to see what I was doing. (Of course, the students had to say yes, they can come.) The response was very positive, very supportive. Then COVID hit. One of the board members wanted to provide healing spaces for stakeholders, which included parents. I was honored with being able to hold a healing space for parents during COVID.

When we came out of COVID, the person that heads up the Family and Community Engagement Office for the district wanted to offer a workshop for parents on cultural responsiveness. I was able to do that. Then I said, wow, maybe we should have an overview of restorative approaches for parents. The district team and I organized a virtual space for parents to learn what restorative approaches are and what they are not. From that training, there were six or seven parents who wanted to know how to be a part of this at their child's school and what they could do.

In our district, we have restorative school-based coordinators. I worked with about 18 schools intensively. This year, at one of those 18 schools, it was decided that they would bring in parents to sit in Circle with them to help parents understand what it looks like when your child participates. So that is one of their goals this year. That's one way that we're pulling parents into Circles.
Another way that we're pulling parents into this work is through the Family and Community Engagement office. The director meets with parents who may have gotten into a particular situation at their young person's school and for whatever reason, had to be banned from coming on campus. The parent or caregiver is given the opportunity to make things right by engaging in restorative conversations with the Office of Family and Community Engagement—about what happened, what they need, how they were impacted by receiving a letter telling them they can't come to the campus for a while. And because of those restorative conversations some parents have actually gone back to the schools, or even the classrooms and apologized. As a result, some restraining letters are now removed because the parent has shifted to make things right. So that's another way that our parents are involved with our RJ work. They get the opportunity to sit in a restorative process to be accountable for how they showed up.

L: That's brilliant. It sounds like your district has so thoroughly integrated restorative processes with everybody: teachers, staff, law enforcement (if warranted) are routinely included, but I think the parents get left out of it sometimes. They need to have that connection.

R: We have a long way to go, but I believe that with commitment and patience, we can get there. It's one step at a time. It didn't take a week for us to get where we are, so it's not going to take a week for us to transform and get where we want to go. When the small steps are successful, you share the success. And when the small steps are not successful, then you sit and think about, what could we have done differently? What's the next step for us to make it better?

I'm in that space right now. “Now Robin, what do you need to do to help make things better, to help make the implementation better, to help empower others to take over the work?” You know, restorative practice is my baby, so I hold on tight to the work, but I realize that if I hold on too tight to the work, I'm not living up to what I'm preaching, which is shared power. So having to loosen the reins in the past couple of years has really helped me to see how other people can blossom when they take the work.

L: How long a process has it been since your district started implementing restorative practices within your district? It goes back pretty far, right?

R: Yeah, it does. I know that there were a couple of schools who partnered up with an outside organization and started doing some of the work. It was mainly focused on the reduction of
suspensions and working with young people who were having challenges. In 2013, 2014, when the union took hold of the work, they realized that this is something that we need universally, but we really want to focus on how to build that foundation of relationships. So, we shifted from looking at trying to use RJ to only reduce suspensions to how we can build relationships and community. So, I think 2015 -16 is when this work really got off the ground and became known across all the district.

One of the challenges with implementing whole school restorative practices is when you have large turnovers or leadership transfers, new leaders may come in with a focus, goal, or knowledge that may not include restorative justice. That means we have to have a conversation to see how they feel about committing to continuing the work. Likewise, if the person who was leading RJ initiatives transfers to another school, the work leaves with that person. This is why it is important that the school has built leadership capacity to sustain the work of RJ.

L: And even more now, with the crisis that we're seeing around teacher retention.

R: We have some work to do. Absolutely.

L: I think restorative practices might be one of the keys that could help keep people in their positions because it would prioritize relationships. Many new teachers come in and they're just handed a bunch of demands, a bunch of rules and procedures, and it would be very overwhelming.

R: It is, it is. What I'm finding now is, with the extra work put on teachers along with burnout from having to cover extra classes because we don't have enough educators, sitting in Circle provides a space where they can just decompress and have conversations—a space where they're truly listened to. It enables them to go to work the next day with a different mindset and say "I can make it through the rest of the week," Monthly, I try to have a space where teachers can come and sit in Circle because that's what we need now. We need to be listened to; we need to be supported. We need to know that we still have a gift to give others. A feeling of, “I belong in this space. I'm respected in this space. I'm part of this community, and if I leave this community, then a significant piece of the puzzle is going to be gone.” I really want teachers to have that space to know that they are seen, that they are heard, that they belong, that they're connected. Because if that happens, they'll be more willing to stay in their job. I say that because in my classroom, when children felt that way, they came to class. Imagine that! It had
to be because they knew that they were valued, that they knew that they were heard, that they were loved.

L: I hear the school-to-prison pipeline mentioned in some of the things I've read about your early work. Do you have a sense if that's changed in the last 10 years or not? I have an idea in some of the larger cities that it's still a constant flow. Do you get that impression?
R: I do. The reason I say that is because many policies are still impacting students of color—Black children—specifically with dress codes. A lot of practices that are taking place have implicit bias and racism embedded in them. If we don't take a moment to look at who this particular policy impacts, then it's going to continue to harm some students. You may have a large group of students, and one student out of that group may choose to drop out of school or choose to act out. As a result of acting out, they are suspended from school, and we know suspension is the number one contributor to the school-to-prison pipeline. So, until we really have an upheaval of these types of policies and take a close look at who the policies impact the most, then we're going to always be in that cycle of school-to-prison pipeline. I think now is a good time to address that.

I was speaking with a close friend of mine yesterday, and they shared that one of their concerns now is the overrepresentation of Black children in special ed or being referred for mental health services. That, I think, is happening because of COVID-19, as young people have come back into school settings. Now they want to label young people when their new needs are showing up in their behaviors, so that's a big concern.

L: That can be another factor that contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. That mindset just keeps raising its ugly head in all different ways. Which segues into a question I had about being in Circle and having a racist dynamic take over the Circle or an individual exhibiting that mindset within a Circle. I've heard stories and I've read stories. Have you had that experience? Have you been in a Circle with that kind of dynamic? Can you say anything about how to interrupt it?
R: I haven't had a situation where I sat in Circle and a racist incident came up that had to be addressed. I have been a part of a Circle, specifically a training, where someone made the common comment, “I don't see color when I see my students.” Of course, in Circle, as a facilitator, keeper, or trainer, you want the Circle to handle those incidents unless there is a need for you to come in. Someone in that space actually spoke up about that comment, and it was addressed, and the person who said it took it in stride. Of course, this was the third day of
a four-day training. The Circle was able to respond to what the person said, and it was resolved and understood.

There was another incident that I feel was specifically about race and implicit bias. There was a reintegration process that took place, and we talked about agreements for how we were going to move forward. And, maybe unintentionally, someone used those agreements to control the student who was returning to the learning space. I felt the way this person formerly viewed this student, prior to the student having to be removed from school, didn't change. They held onto that perception even after welcoming that student back into the learning space. So now, what is considered a healing process is being used to continue to harm the student because the perception has not changed. I was unable to address it because it happened after I left. So, my continued push is to ensure that people don't take a healing process and weaponize it for their own benefit, because they don't want to look within themselves to see how their perception, their beliefs, their value system is contributing to what may have happened.

L: Did the Circle eventually address that situation as a whole or was there another way of dealing with it?

R: After the agreements were made and everything was okay, the students welcomed the student back. After I left and went back to my office, the children were being children and doing what they do. That was actually when the incident happened. It was at the end of the day. So the Circle was already over. And this school doesn't utilize restorative practices in a way where they are circling up every day or it's not a normal thing to happen in the school. I addressed it with the leadership of the school but nothing was reported to let me know it was addressed. So that's a problem that is persistent, I think, in the nature of race relations.

L: You have to be on an old hand at Circles to be able to deal with it, right?

R: Mm-hmm. You know, it's a thin line when you are keeping Circle and that comes up. Like I said, you really want the Circle to be able to handle and hold issues and harms that may come up in the space and you want it to be through the community. But there are times where a harm may happen and I have to call in people rather than call out, because sometimes when you call out in Circle that can be harmful as well. Really, you have to understand how to call in a person when something they may have said has a potential to cause harm or has caused harm. That is something that I have to always remember, “Okay, Robin. This right here is kind of making you a little upset because of what they're doing to the Circle, but then that makes me
turn in and say, “Okay, why is it making you upset? Are you trying to control the Circle yourself? What do you need to do?” And it kind of centers me to let me know, “Okay, Robin. You've got to be restorative, you've got to continue to be loving, you've got to continue to be accepting, understanding, respectful, honoring, as we think about those values that we bring to the space with us.” So, it takes maybe one or two seconds, but all of that happens in my head and I can get it together and call the person in.

L: Well, I think it’s a wonderful note to end on, that you have so embedded this practice and its values in yourself. Obviously your influence and your work has really spread and we value you because of that. I am honored to hear about everything you've done and how well it's going in your district. I appreciate that. And thank you for talking with us.

R: Oh, you are so welcome. I am so honored, Loretta, thank you so much.