

**PROPOSAL for Financial Support for LCCJ
BE STRONG Program
Handbook Pilot Project**

About Us

Lanark County Community Justice (LCCJ) started as a volunteer program to encourage offender accountability, victim participation and community engagement in the aftermath of crime. The event that triggered our creation was a tragic fire in Almonte in 1997 that was started by three young people as a prank, but led to the deaths of two people and the destruction of a business.

With strong support from police agencies and the Crown Attorney's Office in Lanark County, a grass roots group came together to facilitate community justice forums to heal the harms caused by this tragic event and rebuild relationships. As interest in restorative justice circles grew, small groups of volunteers formed up throughout the county in Carleton Place, Lanark Highlands, Mississippi Mills, Perth and Smiths Falls to undertake similar restorative justice forums for other crimes and misdemeanours. In July 2000, we came together to formally incorporate as the Lanark County Community Justice Program Inc.

Over the years, since incorporation, LCCJ has received program funding from a number of organizations, including the Ontario Solicitor General's Office and the Ministry of the Attorney General, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, Justice Canada, the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), Lanark County United Way, the Law Foundation of Ontario, Commonwell Mutual, Lanark County Council and individual townships throughout the county, as well as community groups and service clubs.

We currently operate with only two paid staff, one of whom is part-time, a hard-working board of directors and a dedicated group of volunteer facilitators who conduct restorative justice forums and bring the concepts of restorative circles to all age ranges of students in Lanark County schools.

Like many community-based agencies, LCCJ has experienced financial ups and downs over the years, and is currently in a period of strategic realignment of its programs, having just gone through a highly successful community fund-raising initiative to upgrade our financial position and ensure the viability of our core restorative justice program. While our restorative-based court diversion program, which typically conducts between 40 to 50 forums per year at no cost to participants, is now adequately funded for 2019, we are looking for partnership/sponsorship support for phase 2 of a critically important youth-oriented program we began three years ago, called **BE STRONG**.

BE STRONG

BE STRONG (Building, Encouraging Supportive Trusting Relationships of Neutral Ground) began in February 2016 as a result of a successful three-year funding proposal to Ontario Trillium Foundation, which allowed LCCJ to hire a program coordinator and recruit, train and support a cadre of enthusiastic volunteers to work with school administrators, teachers and students in Lanark County elementary and secondary schools to help students build resilience, learn peaceful conflict resolution skills, increase emotional literacy and self-regulation skills, to nurture empathy in others, and foster a healthy and vibrant culture of caring within schools.

The anticipated outcomes of the program were fewer behavioural and disciplinary problems, improved mental and emotional well-being, a stronger sense of connection and belonging among students, which could conceivably impact on student drop-out and expulsion rates, reduce addictions, and even reduce the risk of youth suicides.

This three year program was highly successful and LCCJ will be looking for future long-term funding to continue it in the future. In the meantime, we are looking for **immediate** sponsorship for one very significant component of the previous BE STRONG program – to validate through a four-month trial within one or two schools the design, structure and application in practical use of our **BE STRONG Handbook**.

The core objective of BE STRONG was to introduce the concept of circles in classrooms to create a safe place in which all circle participants, students and teachers, and at all age groups, can, as one expert has expressed it "step in the direction of their best self." Circles help break down personal, social and cultural barriers between students (and teachers as well) and encourage active and non-judgmental sharing and listening, self reflection and emotional literacy, and the development of children as healthy, competent and moral individuals.

Specific goals and benefits in the use of circles are:

* to create a better educational environment for all students that improves educational attainment, social and emotional learning, personal growth and life experience;
* to reduce bullying, shaming and taunting, or other acts of violence by creating a classroom and school environment that is emotionally and physically safe;
* to reduce the risk of self harm or stigmatization that can leave lasting scars.

The BE STRONG Handbook

*Every journey starts with a destination. Every destination needs a road map.*

The BE STRONG program needed a roadmap to eventually reach its destination of teaching teachers and other school administrators, program volunteers and students themselves about how to incorporate restorative practices into classrooms as a core element of empowering student success, and into their lives in general. The BE STRONG Handbook was our roadmap.

This handbook evolved based on the experiences of volunteers and teachers and the commitment of project leaders to create a living, but lasting, guide for use in successive years. The commitment to produce such a handbook was understood early in the development of the three-year OTF funded program that was successfully delivered in numerous schools throughout Lanark County, reaching thousands of students between 2016 and 2019. However, as the handbook began to evolve and take shape in the last year of the three year program, it was warmly received by our volunteer facilitators as a practical tool to use, but never received a proper and thorough review in regard to its design, functionality and adaptability for use by teachers and students on an ongoing basis.

As it was always meant to be, in addition, a living document, LCCJ believes it needs to be the basis of a well-designed and thorough review via a four month demonstration project in one or two schools in Lanark County.

This is no ordinary handbook. It incorporates a practical, multi-stepped approach to introducing and utilizing the circle process. Level 1 introduces the circle concept to school staff and explains the concepts of restorative justice versus retributive justice.

Level 2 introduces students to circles, with the use of talking pieces, and a focus on listening to others with mindfulness.

In level 3, students and teachers appreciate how teaching and learning can be done in circles, with a number of different modules on building relationships, showing gratitude and appreciation, "sticking together" and friendship, "picturing my future" and sharing stories of moments of success from personal experiences. There are also modules on identity, gender and building healthy relationships and choosing trustworthy friends.

Level 4 helps students envision a desirable future for themselves and addresses how students can create safe spaces to discuss concerns about cultural acceptance, and develop leadership skills within circles. The handbook incorporates considerable material from other published restorative and pedagogical resources, but as a comprehensive manual on how to actually plan and manage circle processes within schools, it is in our view *a unique and valuable resource*.

As development of this comprehensive handbook, including the experience gained from its utilization, was a key substantive outcome of the BE STRONG program, LCCJ strongly believes all the effort to create and implement the handbook over the past three years should not be lost. We therefore would like to see a highly focused pilot project within one or two schools through which LCCJ would gain further in-field experience on the strengths and weaknesses of the handbook as a practical guide. The longer-term goal is to make the handbook, based on pilot program results, available to school boards and schools throughout Ontario and other provinces.

Handbook Details

The Handbook is a complex and comprehensive guide to introducing and utilizing the circle process within a classroom setting. In its current physical form, it runs to well over 200 pages, in an easily totable three-ring binder. It can also be provided on a CD or via online access.

1. **Introduction**The role and purpose of the Handbook is briefly explained for circle keepers and others, with an emphasis on the importance of "appreciative inquiry" as a methodology used throughout the circle preparation stage.
2. **Lanark County Community Justice**This short section provides some background on LCCJ's mission and goals and how they are reflected in the BE STRONG program. The mission of this particular program is to "*Collaborate in developing inclusive, caring and safe school and youth centre communities through restorative practices*."
3. **Principles of Restorative Practice**A backgrounder for educators, section 3 defines the meaning of "restorative" via a detailed article from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), followed by a paper, derived from a variety of sources, that describes the importance of a whole school approach, a trauma-sensitive learning environment, and respectful use of power, the importance of justice – *human beings view every relationship in their lives as just or unjust* – and how peacemaking circles can feed and nurture "the good wolf" in all of us. Teachers and administrators reading this section will have a good grasp of how the circle process can help build positive, trustful relationships between student peers and between students and teachers.
4. **BE STRONG – A Continuum of Support**The continuum of restorative practices begins with "affective statements" – that is active non-judgmental listening and expression of feelings and the impact of actions taken by others. Affective listening leads to retroactive, non-judgmental questions in addressing harmful actions or challenging behaviours – questions such as "What happened and what were you thinking at the time?" or "Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way?" Pro-active circles and responsive circles can be used to build inclusion, providing students with opportunities to share feelings, ideas and experiences, or address harms. At the far end of the continuum lie restorative meetings and conferences individuals who have acknowledged causing harm can meet with those who have been harmed in a safe, supportive and restorative environment. Understanding this continuum is a key component of seeing how restorative practices can be employed within a school setting, and the insights and skill sets educators must develop to employ these practices successfully.
5. **Restorative Circle Practice**The circle is the heart of any restorative session, and this section describes the essential elements in constructing a circle, for example how to seat circle members, the importance of an opening and closing ceremony, the role of a centerpiece and a talking piece, the importance of respect within a circle, and the role of the circle keeper or facilitator. It explains the importance of preparation by circle keepers, with some simple but detailed bullet points on format, circle tools, how to troubleshoot challenging behaviours, and the importance of debriefing. Much of this was created with LCCJ volunteer facilitators in mind, but can be easily adapted for use by teachers and teaching assistants or other volunteer helpers in the classroom.
6. **Restorative Circles**This is the nuts and bolts of designing and utilizing circles. In level 1, the plan and structure of the circle is explained, with guidance on how to introduce circles to teaching staff. The concepts of retributive versus restorative are outlined and there is a sample letter to explain the program goals and objectives to parents and guardians.
Level 2 introduces students to circles, with the use of talking pieces, and a focus on listening to others with mindfulness.
In level 3, students and teachers appreciate how teaching and learning can be done in circles, with a number of different modules on building relationships, showing gratitude and appreciation, "sticking together" and friendship, "picturing my future" and sharing stories of moments of success from personal experiences. There are also modules on identity, gender and building healthy relationships and choosing trustworthy friends.
Level 4 helps students envision a desirable future for themselves and also addresses how students can create safe spaces to discuss concerns about cultural acceptance, and develop leadership skills within circles.
7. **Within and Beyond the Circle**This module focuses on understanding and developing emotional intelligence – which, briefly described, is the ability to recognize, understand and manage emotions in yourself, and the ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships.
The module provides guidance for teachers and students in understanding and expressing feelings through the use of "I messages" as in "I feel disrespected" versus "you messages" as in "I feel that you disrespect me." Learning to express feelings through "affective statements" that provide feedback on the impact and scope of harm from negative behaviours is a critical pathway to humanizing people and changing the dynamics of a situation that can have an important cumulative impact within a school community.
This leads to a discussion of appreciative inquiry (AI) as a tool for personal and social betterment. The premise of AI is that deliberately asking positive questions around affirmative topics ignites constructive dialogue and inspired action within organizations and communities. It is based on an underlying assumption that people and organizations are full of assets, capabilities, resources and strengths that can be located, affirmed, leveraged and encouraged. As one AI expert has stated "Words create worlds." The handbook contains sample lists of AI-framed questions that can be used to focus attention, connect ideas and find deeper insights, and create forward movement.
8. **Resources**The Handbook includes an extensive list of online resources, guides and books focused on restorative practices in general and teaching restorative practices within the school system. These resources have been carefully vetted (but can be expanded upon) and include links to Canadian resources such as the Ontario-based Restorative Practice Consortium and the International Institute for Restorative Practices (Canada) which has an excellent bookstore with many free teaching resources. Many of the websites, guides and books emanate from the US and reflect the strong influence that restorative practices have had on education in both countries.
9. **Surveys**The Handbook includes short surveys that can be used immediately prior to and following a class circle in the form of student "check in" and "check out" rounds, as well as more formal pre and post circle surveys that teachers can complete with simple check-offs of a list of 13 questions against four levels of class responsiveness, for example, "Students do their part to maintain an orderly, purposeful learning environment": "seldom", "with prompting", "aware of the value and apply with little prompting", or "usually apply without prompting".

The Handbook also contains self-reporting survey for students ages 11 to 17 that is designed to be answered at the end of a semester or school year to anonymously report their emotional states, attitudes and behaviours over a list of 25 questions.

In addition to these existing survey tools, the project will be developing a new analytical survey tool aimed at school administrators, teachers, teaching assistants and students to gauge the effectiveness and ease of use of the Handbook curriculum materials over the course of the project.

The Pilot Project

Our objective would be to carry out a full school year pilot project in one or two schools in Lanark County. A number of schools have already participated in the BE STRONG program over the past three years, so determining which school(s) to include in the pilot project would not be a difficult challenge, given the existing familiarity of many schools with the former BE STRONG program and our familiarity with these schools.

The pilot project would incorporate the services on a voluntary basis of two leaders of the existing BE STRONG program, Andrew Lynch and Brian Peters, both former school principals and both strong advocates of restorative practices within the school system.

The project would include constant, real-time evaluation of the components of the Handbook in classroom settings, with 360° feedback on the handbook modules, teaching challenges, and the classroom learning experience.

There would also be a qualitative and quantitative feedback analysis conducted with teachers and with students, in an age appropriate manner, to gain further insights. All useful feedback would be incorporated into upgrading and improving the Handbook.

In our view, the handbook, as a comprehensive manual on how to actually plan and manage circle processes within schools, is *a unique and valuable resource*. With changes and improvements incorporated into the handbook based on the feedback from this pilot project, LCCJ intends to promote and make available the BE STRONG handbook to other school boards throughout Ontario. The intention is to make the content available for free online or at modest cost in printed form.

Before doing so, however, the BE STRONG pilot project, as described above, will yield important and useful feedback on the usability of the Handbook and help ensure the extensive planning and effort that went into the development of the handbook is not lost, but shared with other school boards throughout Ontario.

Impact

Through the OTF-funded three year BE STRONG program, LCCJ staff and volunteers reached out to schools throughout Lanark County with the offer to engage teachers and students, at varying age ranges in circle experiences. Some school administrators and teachers took up the offer and we ran our program in numerous classrooms, often on a weekly basis, over the course of three years. The program was extremely well-received and the experience gained led to the development of the Handbook as a guide designed to let teachers themselves understand the core concepts of restorative practices, appreciative inquiry and the importance of emotional literacy, and to run our program on their own. Before that can happen successfully, LCCJ needs to test out and validate the adaptability of the Handbook and its successful utilization to a teacher-led environment. We know the value of the BE STRONG program, we know the value of the Handbook as a guide and tool to run the program, and now we need to know how successfully it can be run under the leadership of school principals and teachers.

If the transition can be made successfully from LCCJ volunteers running this program in selected classrooms to more schools taking up the program and using the Handbook on their own, the benefits can be enormous. A 2016 research survey by the Ontario-based Evidence Exchange Network for Mental Health and Addictions (EENet) [[1]](#footnote-1) reported the following benefits of programs such as BE STRONG in schools:

* **Hope**–students experience higher life satisfaction a year and 18 months later, while also showing significantly improved levels of hope, self-worth and hardiness, and significant reductions in anxiety and depression (Waters, 2011).
* **Resilience**–students experience improved levels of social competence, happiness, sense of connectedness, and reduced psychosomatic complaints, and negative emotions (Stewart & Wang, 2012). Resiliency programs have also been shown to reduce distress, improve wellbeing and promote learning among students (Waters, 2011).
* **Coping**–students show significant improvement on self-reported measures of anxiety compared with control groups. Effects were maintained at 4, 6, 12 and 24 months later (Higgins & O’Sullivan, 2015).
* **Conflict resolution**–programs are successful in promoting student’s pro-social behaviours, while the use of peer mediators may be effective for longer term outcomes (Blank et al., 2010).
* **Mindfulness** –programs are successful in reducing behavioural problems (e.g. anxiety and depression), as well as increasing cognitive performance and prosocial psychosocial attributes (e.g. emotional regulation, social-emotional competence and coping) (Felver et al., 2015; Zenner, Hermleben-Kurz, Walac, 2014; Langer et al., 2015).

Budget Proposal

We are seeking funding from Xxxxxxxxxxx to conduct this Pilot Project over a 12 month period. This would include initial meetings with staff in selected schools to explain the project goals and elicit their support, hopefully in June, but this could also take place in early September. The two lead project managers, Andrew Lynch and Brian Peters, have already have established strong relations with schools that could participate in this pilot project. Andrew is a retired school principal with the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board and was the team leader for the three-year BE STRONG program and principal author of the BE STRONG Handbook. Brian is a retired elementary school principal and a trainer with the International Institute for Restorative Practices. He was instrumental in bringing restorative practices to the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario, and was an active member of the LCCJ BE STRONG team, as well as serving as an LCCJ Board member.

Starting in September, we would work with teachers and other school staff to utilize the circle modules – there are a number of specifically titled "circle forward" modules in the Handbook that start with Introducing the circle to the staff (circle 1.1) to introducing circles in schools (circle 1.2) to circle on taking the temperature on the classroom climate, understanding and living with school rules, relationship building, who and what makes us feel good, thinking and talking about boundaries, exploring cultural responsiveness, and many other topics, suitable for different age groups. We would assist teachers in working selectively through these circles and assess and analyze the challenges faced, the quality of the circle guidance materials, and any difficulties in using it. The process, however, will be iterative. As described b y Andrew Lynch,

"The viability of the Handbook is manifested in its utility for teachers and its effectiveness in helping them develop a restorative culture in their classrooms. This will take some time and entail a circular feedback process. I think that a meaningful pilot will span much of the school year and likely represent a first phase.

"The sooner school staff take ownership of the process, the more likely it is to be sustainable. I think that the role of Brian and I is to establish an implementation plan with school staff and determine the most effective manner of support. For example, pulling teachers together for circle debrief sessions facilitated by us on a regular basis will help the teachers with their implementation and highlight the strengths and limitations of the handbook. This process will help us keep sustain the handbook as a living document.

"Details of the process need to be determined in consultation with school staff – especially administrators who can help create supportive conditions for implementation.

"Context and things over which we have no control. Schools – especially those in the UCDSB which is facing considerable financial challenges which will entail service cutbacks – will be particularly stressful environments this year. It will be particularly important for us to work with a school in a supportive and collaborative way. We will need to listen carefully and be able to acknowledge local challenges, while honestly saying, "This is what we can offer, and here is how it may be of value to you. What do you think?" I can say with some authority that, at the very least, most regular classrooms are populated with students who have more diverse needs than ever, with teachers feeling less supported than ever. It is no small irony, that what we have to offer, though by no means a panacea, is a framework that is essential for some and good for all. It will be critical that they feel supported by us."

While LCCJ strongly believes in the quality of materials currently in the Handbook, before we promote it more widely, the insights gained from a carefully controlled pilot launch of the Handbook materials in one or two schools will yield enormous benefits – in fact, it will be a form of appreciative inquiry that will greatly strengthen and validate the Handbook as a valuable circle resource.

We expect it will take several more months to analyze and incorporate the inputs from this pilot project. Following this, the next vital steps for LCCJ are to promote the Handbook to other school boards throughout Ontario and to look at ways to assist them in implementing circles within their classrooms. We will be looking for additional funding from other sources for this broader outreach effort, which may include attending teacher conferences, personal visits to school administrators, practical in school demonstrations, etc.

The funding we request from Xxxxxxxxxxx is only for the Pilot Project itself.

Budget

Honoraria/stipend for two project leaders over 12 months
at $500 per month $12,000

Travel expenses for fall semester at 32 visits to 2 schools at
average 60 Km round trip $2,400

Printing costs additional Handbooks with binders (10 books) $500

Contribution to LCCJ overhead, administrative and operating
expenses (rent, utilities, insurance, etc.) $4,000

Contingency $1,500

 Total **$20,400**

We are eager and willing to meet with xxxxxxxxxxxx at any time to discuss this funding request, have you meet with the project leaders, and to show you a copy of the actual Handbook.

Respectfully submitted

Scott Ferguson,
Chair of the Board
Lanark County Community Justice

1. Social Emotional Learning, School Years Evidence Brief, EENet, August 2016, <https://eenet.ca/sites/default/files/pdfs/SchoolYears_English_EENetEvidence%20Brief_Final.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)