



SchoolTalk

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

**A YEAR OF  
RECOVERY AND  
INNOVATION**





## Letter from the Executive Director

SchoolTalk and the school communities we support have faced momentous challenges in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. We are proud of the resilience and innovation displayed over the past two years and what it means for our work going forward.

While all students were disconnected from their school communities to some degree, youth with disabilities and low-income children of color have been disparately impacted by the pandemic. As of December 30, 2021, DC's Black residents represented 50% of the city's positive Covid-19 cases and a disproportionate 77% of lives lost.<sup>1</sup> We see students struggling with increased social isolation, anxiety, depression, and violence, making it even more critical that schools are prepared to meet the needs of all students equitably and inclusively.

Every youth has the right to learn in environments where they feel safe, heard, and can find joy. These are the keys to helping them regain their footing as learners. Now is the time for schools to reset and rethink school structures, systems, resource allocation, and staff training.

We are in a moment that offers a unique opportunity to rebuild and reimagine school communities. The stories we share in this annual report illustrate how SchoolTalk and its partners have displayed innovation and courage to address the growing, complex needs of the communities we serve.

Thank you for inspiring us to know that this work is possible. We are prepared to work hand in hand with you in the coming years and are excited to see what we can accomplish together.

<sup>1</sup> Government of the District of Columbia. "COVID-19 Surveillance," December 30, 2021, <https://coronavirus.DC.gov/data>



**LEILA PETERSON**  
Executive Director

Leila Peterson has served as SchoolTalk's executive director since 2008. She is deeply committed to the work of advocating for youth with disabilities and helping schools to institute policies and practices that promote inclusion and community-building. Leila also teaches as an adjunct professor for the Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University.



## SECTION ONE SCHOOLTALK OVERVIEW

### About SchoolTalk

Founded in 2008, SchoolTalk is a District of Columbia–based nonprofit that supports the education community in collaboratively tackling complex challenges and creating practical solutions for assisting youth with and without disabilities achieve success. SchoolTalk’s programs actively work to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth through proactive initiatives—such as youth leadership and mentoring, skill–building, and workforce development—and direct intervention to resolve issues in productive ways, such as facilitating interagency problem–solving and restorative justice.

SchoolTalk’s staff has expertise in a variety of key areas, including restorative justice, Universal Design for Learning, workforce development, assistive technology, conflict resolution, nonviolent communication, positive discipline, trauma–informed practices, special education, and more. SchoolTalk serves a diverse community and employs a diverse team, including board members and supporters, who reflect that community. Over half of SchoolTalk’s staff identify as Black or African American. We view disability as a critical component of our Race, Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity initiatives, and over half of our staff self–identify as having a disability. SchoolTalk employs three full–time youth leadership program assistants who graduated from DC schools and connected to SchoolTalk through its youth programming. Their input helps us to ensure authentic youth voice is integrated across all SchoolTalk programs. The SchoolTalk Board of Directors enrich our organization’s strategic efforts with their diverse experiences, backgrounds, and abilities. More than half of our Board members represent Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color communities.

<sup>1</sup> Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn. Read more [here](#).

## SCHOOLTALK’S REACH 2020-2021 SCHOOL YEAR



# 316

Supported 316 transition–aged (14–21) students with disabilities through InclusiveDC Programming



# 79

Operated in 79 schools



# 56

Collaborated with 56 organizations through our community of practice



# 5880

Provided over 5880 hours of professional development to adults



# 8300

Provided over 8300 hours of programming to youth



# 1400

Over 1400 staff from schools and community organizations attended SchoolTalk led sessions.



### InclusiveDC

SchoolTalk’s InclusiveDC works with D.C. youth with disabilities and their peers in schools, community organizations, and youth-serving systems through its two main initiatives: Arts to Advocacy and College & Career Readiness.

### RestorativeDC

SchoolTalk’s RestorativeDC provides technical assistance, coaching, and training services to individuals and schools with a focus on growing the individual capacity of youth-serving professionals and enhancing the organizational capacity of schools and supporting organizations.

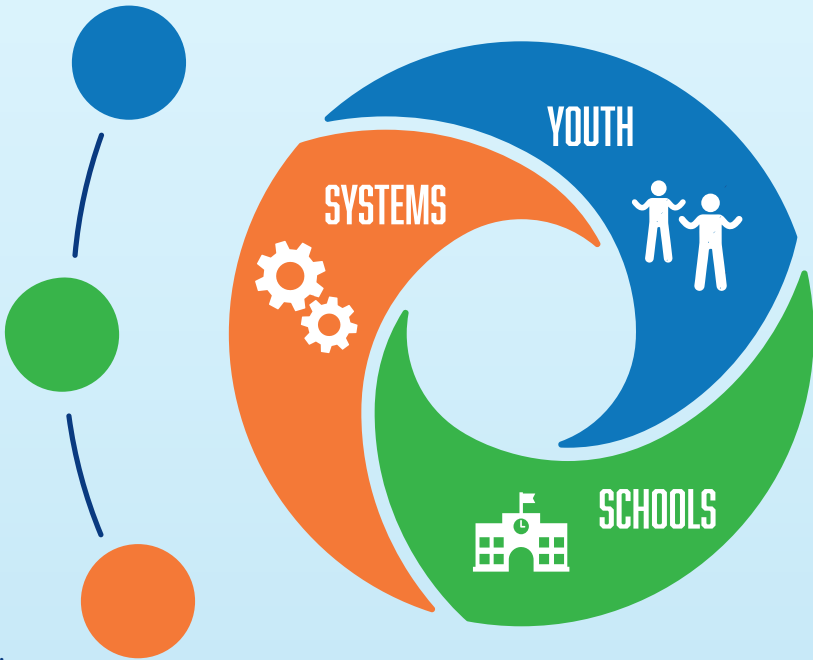
## MISSION:

We tackle critical and complex problems that impact marginalized youth and the schools and systems that support them.

**PROVIDE** youth-centered **PROGRAMMING** to equip every youth with the knowledge and skills to be successful after high school

**HELP** adults **IMPROVE SCHOOL CULTURE** through restorative & inclusive policies and practices

**CONNECT & ALIGN** schools, agencies and other organizations through dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.



## VISION:

School communities where every youth is honored and self-determined.



## SECTION TWO INCLUSIVE DC

SchoolTalk's InclusiveDC initiative works with DC youth with disabilities and their peers in schools, community organizations, and youth-serving systems. InclusiveDC identifies opportunity gaps for DC youth and seeks to bridge those gaps through two main programs: Arts to Advocacy and College & Career Readiness.

### **Arts to Advocacy**

SchoolTalk's Arts to Advocacy program supports the successful transition of DC high school students with disabilities to postsecondary life by providing opportunities for youth to explore creative careers and use art as a vehicle for advocacy.

### **College and Career Readiness**

Focused on the worlds of work and education, SchoolTalk's College & Career Readiness program tackles postsecondary opportunity and outcome gaps for DC transition-age youth with disabilities.



*InclusiveDC | Program Highlight #1*

## Building Connection Through Music

**In 2021  
approximately 200  
students engaged  
in Arts to Advocacy  
programming.**

**SchoolTalk's Music Production & Career Development Program engages DC youth in hands-on music production experiences. Accepted students form a small group focused on learning the essentials of songwriting, audio and music production, and navigating the music industry. Participants receive career coaching in music production from working artists and career development opportunities from SchoolTalk staff, including creating employment portfolios, resumes, headshots, and more.**

Petra first started with SchoolTalk's Music Production & Career Development Program in 2021 as a tenth-grade student and talented artist. Like many other artists, isolation during the pandemic had left her unmotivated with few collaboration opportunities and no live audiences for whom she could perform. She joined SchoolTalk's Music Production program seeking to develop her talents further and gain experience as a recording artist. SchoolTalk provided her with the opportunity to express her creative freedom, collaborate with artists, and explore different avenues of music.

Since 2015 SchoolTalk's Music Production Program, working in partnership with teaching artist Konshens The MC (Konshens is pronounced "conscience"), has provided youth with disabilities individualized instruction in creative writing, spoken word, hip-hop, and instrumentals. SchoolTalk provides students with coaching, guidance, and creative input to create original content. In 2021, SchoolTalk conducted the program virtually due to the pandemic. Despite the shift from in-person programming, Petra was able to work with Konshens The MC and receive the coaching she needed to produce and compile an electronic portfolio. In addition, the program provided her with songwriting skills, studio recording experience, confidence, and opportunities to collaborate with other artists.

As a result of this direct support, Petra was invited by Konshens The MC to collaborate on a remix of the song "Born from the Land," featuring Grammy-award winning composer Ricky Kej and award-winning artist Baba Maal, who voiced the Wakanda soundtrack for Marvel's film Black Panther. Petra collaborated with another artist from her school in developing the musical piece, an experience that she said left her feeling "free" and "unlimited" and boosted her confidence in her songwriting and music production talents.

The anthem "Born from the Land" debuted at the 2021 United Nations Desertification and Drought Day. You can listen to it [here](#) [20:39-28:06].



*InclusiveDC | Program Highlight #2*

## Adapting to Uncertain Times

Since 2008, SchoolTalk has hosted an annual Voices for Change conference to empower youth with disabilities and their peers around topics of education, employment and independence. Every year the event is planned and led by members of the DC Youth Leadership Network and brings together over four hundred DC youth for youth-led self-advocacy workshops, music and drama performances in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and a career exploration scavenger hunt. When the pandemic hit, SchoolTalk had to pivot and find a creative way to ensure that the Voices of Change conference would continue.

SchoolTalk staff met with students and partners to brainstorm ways to host the conference while ensuring the safety of everyone involved. As a result of many conversations, the 2021 Voices of Change program was designed as a virtual competitive experience. Over several months, eight high school teams received remote coaching from experts in advocacy, communication, problem-solving, music production, photography, visual art, videography, and performance. Each team created multimedia pieces reflecting on the pandemic and what they want for their communities moving forward. School teams then competed with each other on Instagram Live and YouTube Live in a format similar to NBC's The Voice, with judges providing feedback and selecting a winner. The multimedia creations developed by each team were then used as tools for advocacy and shared across DC.

At a time when students were desperate for opportunities to connect with their peers and in search of avenues for self-expression, SchoolTalk set an example of what is possible with creativity and determination. Through the 2021 Voices of Change competition students also had the opportunity to collaborate with local entrepreneurs and artists to learn about postsecondary pathways to work, education, and independent living. A total of **44 youth** from eight schools participated in the dynamic 2021 Voices of Change competition.

You can view the powerful pieces these youth teams created [here](#).



**44 youth from eight schools participated in the dynamic 2021 Voices of Change competition.**

*InclusiveDC | Program Highlight #3*

## A Parent's Appreciation

Dear SchoolTalk,

The purpose of this email is to express how pleased I am with SchoolTalk's Jumpstart program. This entire organization needs to be commended for the commitment, dedication, patience, professionalism, and awesome service that they gave to each student intern that took part in their 2021 Summer Youth Employment Program. I truly appreciated the platform they utilized this year to keep each student intern engaged while being virtual. It was an honor to have my son participate and I look forward to him participating again next year.

The staff went above and beyond to ensure that the student interns were comfortable and understood each assignment they were given. I telework from home and I was able to see and hear firsthand how wonderful the team treated each intern. The professionalism, service, and patience they provided to the interns was phenomenal. My son loves music and photography, but he is still working on his social skills. Despite the program being virtual, it managed to keep him engaged and helped him to develop better social skills. He learned really important skills around creating a budget and professionalism.

My son and I will both miss working with the SchoolTalk team. I know that if anyone can complain about something, they can also give a compliment. I am the type of parent that gives high praise and compliment where needed and this is a time where it is needed.

This organization truly needs to be recognized and awarded for the outstanding services it provides to students with special needs.

Thank you,

*Ms. Wright*

Parent of youth participant in Jumpstart 2020 and 2021

**SchoolTalk's JumpStart program** provided job readiness training and work-based learning opportunities to 55 youth with significant disabilities participating in the District of Columbia's Mayor Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program 2021 (MBSYEP), which occurred virtually. To ensure all participants had equitable access to the digital tools necessary to access virtual programming, SchoolTalk provided youth with tablets with workplace readiness training applications installed. In an end-of-program survey, 92% of participants were satisfied with how JumpStart helped them improve their workplace readiness skills.





## SECTION THREE RESTORATIVE DC

SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC initiative supports public and public charter schools in the District of Columbia in whole-school implementation of restorative justice practices and culture change. It does so through intensive, trauma-informed, collaborative, customized, onsite, and locally based technical support to lower incidents of conflict and harm, reduce the use of suspensions and expulsions, increase school performance, and center the school community on relationships, inclusivity, and accountability.

### **Technical Assistance**

Based on research and implementation science, we know that significant organization-level change requires attention to staffing, policies, and schoolwide practices aligned to restorative principles. RestorativeDC supports schools in this effort through Targeted Technical Assistance and Whole School Implementation.

### **Training and Workshops**

RestorativeDC offers a series of trainings and workshops to explore key elements of Restorative Justice. The sessions are designed to be highly participatory, allowing school staff to immerse themselves in restorative practices through guided exercises, role plays, and other experiential learning opportunities.

### **Youth Programming**

SchoolTalk uses a positive youth development approach to promote self-determination and voice for youth with disabilities and their peers through youth-centered capacity building workshops, community-based activities, and civic engagement experiences to empower youth to address issues faced by their communities.

### **Restorative Diversion**

The RestorativeDC initiative supports the DC Department of Human Services Youth Services Division by providing Restorative Diversion interventions that are designed to help youth aged 10 to 18 acknowledge their own actions and harm to their community, understand the impact of self-harm, develop and strengthen social-emotional and problem-solving skills, and identify support strategies that reduce the likelihood of youth becoming serious repeat offenders.

RestorativeDC | PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT #1

## Amplifying Youth Voice

In the spring of 2020, students were faced with navigating the many challenges the pandemic was causing to their lives and dealing with complex emotions after witnessing the traumatic murder of George Floyd. In response to these challenges, RestorativeDC piloted the Our School Our Voice (OSO) program. OSOV was created to provide secondary students a safe, student-led space where they could seek community from their peers and elevate their voices around the issues most important to them.

During the 2020–21 school year, students from four schools ( E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, Columbia Heights Education Campus, Excel Academy Public School for Girls, and Alice Deal Middle School) participated in virtual weekly circles with peers from their own school and monthly citywide circles with students from all four schools. A circle is a restorative justice practice that uses a structured, facilitated process to build connection, understanding, and trust within a group of individuals. Through the use of these circles, students were able to find not only a community, but also the power their voices held.

To further amplify the voice of students and provide them with agency over the important topics being raised, RestorativeDC provided a student circle keeper training. This training was designed to teach students facilitation skills and the core principles of restorative practices such as responsibility, accountability, and justice. The training provided **26 students** with the skills needed to design and lead circles independently as trained circle keepers. These student circle keepers then returned to their schools and led circles for their peers. Students were excited to finally have an opportunity to be seen and heard by their school communities as changemakers.

**52 students participated in RestorativeDC's Our School Our Voice program. 26 students were trained as "youth circle keepers."**

**“This space has really helped me to feel comfortable in my identity, and I am grateful for that. This has helped me to learn who are the people that I can connect with.”**

—Excel Academy student

**“Sometimes you think that you are the only one going through what you are feeling, but in circles, you hear that you aren't the only one experiencing tough times.”**

Staff who worked with students reported growth in critical social-emotional skills, including relationship skills, personal responsibility, self-advocacy, and self-confidence. One student from Alice Deal Middle School said, “I think RestorativeDC does a good job helping people rework how their brain works and learn how to understand things in different ways.” During the 2020–21 school year, **52 students** participated in the Our School Our Voice pilot.

*RestorativeDC | Program Highlight #2*

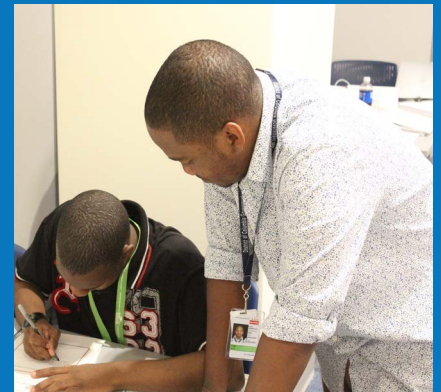
## A Time To Reimagine

Raymond Weeden joined Thurgood Marshall Academy (TMA) as Executive Director in 2019. Traditionally, TMA has been known for its "no-tolerance" discipline policies and focus on academic success. In response to D.C.'s Student Fair Access to School Act of 2018, which calls for schools to lower the frequency of student suspensions, Raymond began working with SchoolTalk to adopt the Whole-School Restorative Justice model as a way to help decrease behaviors that lead to suspension by centering on community building, social-emotional skill development, conflict resolution, and responsible decision making.

SchoolTalk worked closely with school leadership to redefine key terms used by staff, including accountability, behavior, punishment, and consequences. TMA leadership and staff looked at how they engaged with students and explored how they might respond differently to students who make mistakes. Raymond noticed a change in how teachers interacted and communicated with students. He observed teachers having more regular check-ins with students and taking the time to help students work through their feelings. As the school leader, Raymond began modeling using Restorative Justice to improve how he interacts with students.

"SchoolTalk understands that there is no one solution that fits," says Raymond. "At schools, students are learning more than academics. They are learning social and emotional competencies, socialization, and self-management. Students need to feel comfortable knowing that just as they are allowed to make academic mistakes. They are also allowed to make mistakes in their social and emotional growth."

Looking forward, Raymond hopes to have more staff and teachers trained in restorative justice practices so they feel prepared to help students to stay engaged and able to self-regulate and de-escalate. Most of all, he hopes his students will enjoy being at school.



**In SY 2020-21, SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC strengthened the capacity of over 1,280 educators from 179 schools with restorative justice training & coaching to prepare staff for the return to in-person learning.**

**“In my 17 years in public education in DC, the work with RestorativeDC has been the most impactful.”**

**- Raymond Weeden,  
Executive Director at  
Thurgood Marshall  
Academy**



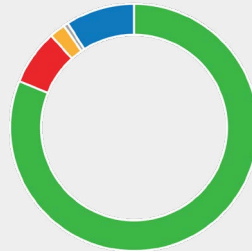
## SECTION FOUR FINANCIALS

### SchoolTalk 2021 FINANCIALS



#### Revenue

	DC Government Contracts	\$2,063,375
	PPP Loan Forgiveness	\$184,100
	Fee for Service	\$52,761
	Individual Contributions	\$15,184
	Foundation/Nonprofit Grants	\$228,752
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$2,544,172</b>

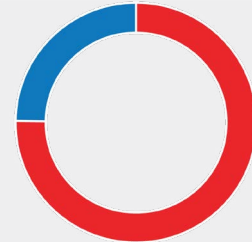
#### REVENUE



#### Expenses

	Program	\$1,617,960
	Admin, Ops, Development	\$532,502
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$2,150,463</b>

#### EXPENSES



SchoolTalk is committed to partnering with local, community-based organizations. \$495,823 of our program expenses went to local DC Certified Business Enterprises. Click [here](#) for more information.

The SchoolTalk logo features a stylized circular icon composed of four colored dots (red, blue, green, orange) arranged in a circle, with lines connecting them to form a partial circle. Below the icon, the text "SchoolTalk" is written in a sans-serif font.

**SECTION FIVE**  
**LOOKING AHEAD**

SchoolTalk is thrilled to announce that we have been selected as one of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Next 50, identifying us as one of 50 leaders and organizations that "through sustained excellence of artistic, educational, athletic, or multi-disciplinary work, are lighting the way forward." We are honored to be included in this group of powerful cultural leaders and organizations and are excited to use this opportunity to further our goal of providing youth with disabilities access to arts in spaces that are both inclusive & restorative.



Meet all of the Next 50 and learn about their amazing work [here](#).



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### THANK YOU TO OUR DONORS

The challenges have been immense, but through it all, our amazing supporters and partners have been with us every step of the way. To you all we owe a sincere thank you.

The logo for Battelle, consisting of the word "BATTELLE" in a bold, italicized, blue sans-serif font.



The logo for Education Forward DC, featuring the text "EDUCATION FORWARD DC" in blue, with a blue and orange arrow pointing to the right.



The logo for Perspectives, featuring a stylized eye with a globe as the iris and the word "Perspectives" in a bold, black sans-serif font.



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