

Transform schools to transform lives

We can help kids before they find trouble, by engaging with them in the middle schools.

By Jose R. Perez and Julian Spencer published [online](#) July 18, 2023 — 5:30PM and in the July 19, 2023 print edition

“Our experience, backed by evidence and research, teaches that schools can enable students to overcome adversity and reach healthy adulthood,” Jose R. Perez and Julian Spencer write.

As two Twin Cities young people with recent justice system experience, we understand the safety concerns behind Bloomington [bringing police](#) into its middle schools (“Some metro districts return police to middle schools,” July 7). We also appreciated the Star Tribune’s series spotlighting Minnesota’s broken juvenile justice system and the need for restorative approaches. Like the Star Tribune Editorial Board we support Minnesota’s newly enacted reforms.

Neither the series nor the new reforms, however, address the elephant in the room: the role of schools in preventing youth crime and system involvement by better engaging their students.

Unexamined in the discussion is the assumption that the place where youth spend much of their time just can’t change the paths of those most at risk. As formerly at-risk students, we disagree. Our experience, backed by evidence and research, teaches that schools can enable students to overcome adversity and reach healthy adulthood.

We each faced big challenges at home and got in trouble in the schools and on the streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul. One of us failed first and ninth grades and struggled with dyslexia. One of us was expelled from sixth grade, adjudicated at 12, spent more time on the streets than inside middle school and became a dad at 16.

Selling drugs, stealing cars and building court records keep many youth busy. We were very busy. We weren’t part of our school communities, close to our teachers or interested in our schoolwork. We felt school wasn’t for us. And we met our needs for belonging, mastery, adventure and purpose outside of school walls, like most of our friends.

Our lives began to change in high school, thanks to relationships with teachers who believed in us, engaged us and helped us find interests and purpose. Both of us transferred to small alternative public schools, which supported us to pursue passions outside of the classroom and turn them into rich learning experiences that built academic credits. We both managed to graduate high school.

Many of our friends weren’t so fortunate. We did some research. About 10,000 Twin Cities kids under 18 are arrested annually. The 2022 Minnesota Student Survey found children’s mental health and school engagement declined to record low levels. Only 42% of children report having strong relationships with one or more adults in school or elsewhere outside the home, according to the Search Institute.

We’ve learned about a powerful model that leaders and educators around the world have used for decades to help kids overcome adversity. Reclaiming Youth at Risk/Circle of Courage encourages schools and other youth programs to prioritize belonging, mastery, independence and generosity.

These programs must be staffed by adults able to meet these four needs and build trusting relationships with kids. When schools and teachers fail to meet core development needs — as in our own middle school experience — they miss crucial opportunities to spark growth and healing.

Over the past year, the two of us launched an initiative called Good Trouble to help build a movement to redesign middle school to prevent journeys through the school-to-prison pipeline before they begin.

Our team of a dozen young people with justice system experience shared their stories, hosted conversations with over 200 local leaders, educators and kids, and produced a documentary and recommendations report, which will be released later this month.

We aim to build a coalition to redesign schools, starting with middle school, to meet the core needs of kids. Let’s give young people the opportunity to turn their trouble into “good trouble.” Let’s make Minnesota the best place for all of its young people to learn, grow and thrive.

Jose R. Perez, 23, of St. Paul and Julian Spencer, 19, of Minneapolis are co-founders of [Good Trouble, an initiative of Bridgmakers](#), a local youth-led nonprofit.

Good Trouble Team Members/Contact Info/Links

For more about Good Trouble, please contact Jose Perez at jose@bridgemakersmn.org or 651.432.7116.

Key Links:

- [Bridgemakers intro video](#) June 2023 (password: bridgemakers)
- *StarTribune* (front page): [How students helped change a state law that barred them from receiving benefits](#) 7/31/21
- AmplifiED Podcast [interview](#) with Jose Perez 7/11/23
- [Why Justice-involved Youth are Reimagining School](#) - Bridgemakers-produced/youth-narrated documentary 12/12/22
- *Pioneer Press* Jose Perez op-ed: [Want more learning and better mental health? Build on students' strengths](#) 9/15/22
- Deeper Learning 2022 conference - Jose Perez's [closing keynote](#) 6/11/22
- MN legislative testimony against raising barriers to teachers of color, [Jose](#) and [Julian](#) 3/2/23
- Bridgemakers [website](#) and [Instagram](#)

Jose R. Perez, 23, Co-Founder. Good Trouble is inspired by Jose's experience failing in conventional schools and encountering the justice system. Jose has served as Bridgemakers' Partner of Policy and Treasurer-Secretary of its Board of Directors since early 2021. He is the youngest member of the Ramsey County Transforming Systems Together Committee and the Advisory Board of the Center for School Change. Jose served as one of 35 leaders nationwide participating in Education Reimagined's National Stand initiative. He has testified five times at the Minnesota Legislature opposing proposed barriers that would hurt teachers of color. Jose has published four op-eds and has led workshops at several conferences in Minnesota and beyond. He is a St. Paul native and the son of a single mother, a Guatemalan immigrant, and a father deported to El Salvador when Jose was one. An English language learner with undiagnosed dyslexia, Jose failed the first and ninth grades before finding purpose and success turning artistry into activism at the High School for Recording Arts. He supported himself and his family through high school as an essential worker, and eventually became the youngest Chipotle kitchen manager in the Twin Cities.

Julian Spencer, 19, Co-Founder. Good Trouble is also inspired by Julian's lived experience of being expelled from school and encountering the juvenile justice system as a sixth-grader. Julian continued to struggle in Minneapolis schools and with the juvenile justice system for several years. Becoming a father at 16 helped him find purpose as a youth advocate for others with similar journeys. Julian is currently Program Coordinator of Bridgemakers and was a participating student in the Bridgemakers' Changemakers program during his senior year. A member of the Hennepin County Youth Advisory Board and Hennepin County Youth Justice Steering Committee, he also serves as a Fellow with the Legal Rights Center's End Youth Prisons campaign and a Policy Fellow with Youthprise. Julian has testified twice at the Minnesota Legislature against raising barriers to teachers of color. He is a part-time student at Minneapolis Community and Technical College.

Cole Stevens, 21, is Bridgemakers Chief Impact Officer and Co-Founder. Cole is a Minneapolis native, entrepreneur and biracial son of two artists, which taught him to enjoy and be a bridge between different cultures. In high school, Cole struggled with addiction and mental health challenges, was expelled from school and gained juvenile justice system experience. Similar struggles took the life of his best friend while Cole was working to lift his family out of debt. After losing his job after the pandemic hit, Cole and Bridgemakers co-founder Walter Cortina co-led the successful campaign to change Minnesota's discriminatory law barring otherwise eligible working youth from unemployment benefits. Cole helped raise almost \$3 million to launch Bridgemakers and is currently leading program impact and strategic direction.

Jon Bacal, Good Trouble and Bridgemakers Mentor. Jon spent two decades designing, launching and directing innovative charter schools and entrepreneurial education startups, including Hiawatha Academies (2005-09) and national Next Generation Learning Challenges awardee Venture Academy (2012-19) in Minneapolis, along with the Minneapolis school district's Office of New Schools (2009-11) and SchoolStart (2000-05), a charter incubator that helped launch 25 new schools. Jon's experiences as a leadership coach and mentor to Bridgemakers co-founder Walter Cortina and other under-resourced students led to his appreciation of the genius and leadership of youth overcoming extreme adversity, including juvenile justice system involvement. Jon earlier was the education advisor to the Mayor of St. Paul (1996-2001) and taught American history to Czech students who catalyzed the 1989 Velvet Revolution. A graduate of Georgetown University, he discovered his lifelong calling for youth voice and leadership as a shy 13-year-old.

Haben Ghebregish, Good Trouble and Bridgemakers Mentor. Over her decade working in schools, Haben has mentored hundreds of under-resourced youth as a teacher, tutor, and advisor. She is Lead Facilitator at High School for Recording Arts, Coach at HSRA's partner 4 Learning and taught math and coached debate in Detroit through Teach For America. A first generation graduate and immigrant from Eritrea, she is a graduate of the University of Chicago (B.A.) and Hamline University (M.Ed.) and a board member of Innovative Quality Schools.