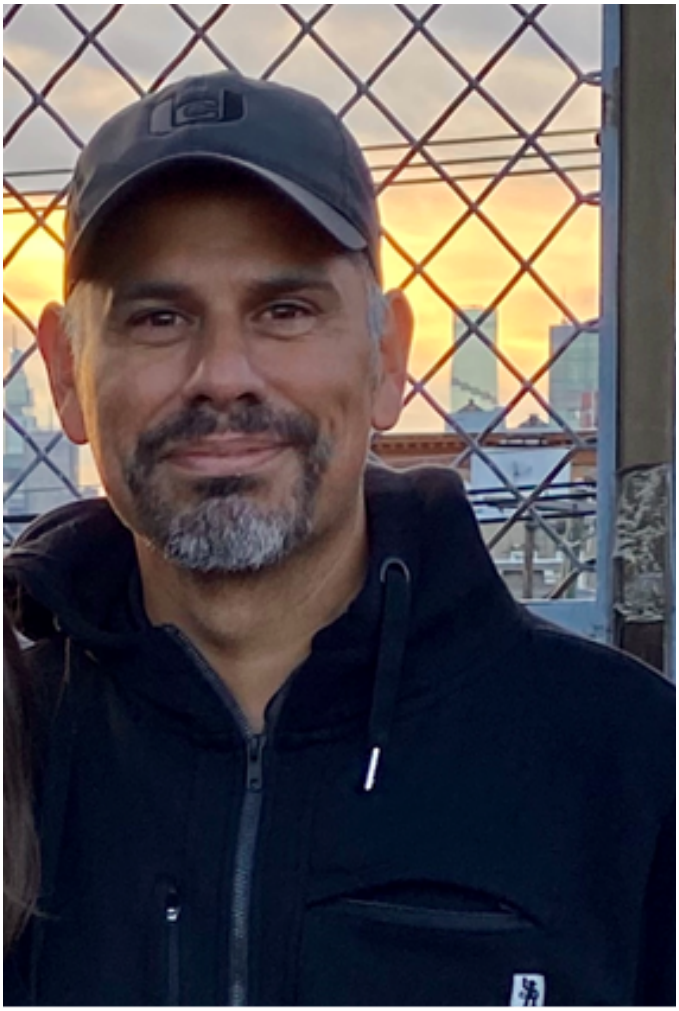
CSS ALUM SPOTLIGHT

George Morales



George Morales, PGC Peer Leader Alum, Passaic High School
PGC Faculty Advisor, Union City High School

If you've been a part of a Peer Group Connection training in the past 15 years, you've likely heard George Morales talk about the power of PGC. George has been a part of the PGC network for decades, starting as a 9th grade outreach recipient at Passaic High School before becoming a peer leader in his senior year. And for the past 19 years, George has been paying forward his own program experience by serving as a PGC faculty advisor at Union City High School in New Jersey.

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George's Roots as a Peer Leader

"PGC was always that place you could go and decompress with peers," George remarked in looking back at his own experiences as a student in PGC. "PGC helped me as a ninth grader transitioning into high school. All the stories and conversations in my outreach group really helped me that year, and even when I tried out for and then joined the football team". When he was a junior, George applied to become a peer leader so he could be one of the seniors to support the incoming ninth graders in the way he was supported.

After high school, George went on to college and became an accounting major. The leadership and interpersonal skills he gained from his year as a peer leader helped him feel more secure in transitioning to college as he was equipped to navigate relationships with new peers and get involved in clubs and organizations. Little did he know that PGC would become an even bigger part of his professional journey.

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During his time in college, George accompanied a friend to a career fair at Snyder High School in Jersey City. Intending to tag along for the event, George found himself talking with different high school students about his experiences. A teacher from Snyder, overhearing these conversations, pulled George aside to ask him more about his trajectory and encouraged him to consider shifting focus from accounting to education. Twenty-six years later, George is a beloved history teacher and soccer coach at Union City High School, awarded multiple Teacher of the Year awards and still enjoying his role in the classroom.

PGC at Union City High School

In 2003, when George was a newer teacher in Union City, he approached his principal about bringing Peer Group Connection to the school, recalling the powerful impact it had on him and knowing how much it could positively influence the students he was teaching. Hearing George's passion for the program, his principal, with support from Center for Supportive Schools (then Princeton Center for Leadership Training), worked to ensure administrative success for a 2004 program launch. When staffing the program, George recalled his own PGC peer leadership retreat and the lessons learned about selecting balanced co-leaders for the benefit of the groups they would facilitate. In selecting his co-advisors, George considered his strengths and areas for growth and selected Beverly Grady and Chrissy Lopes to join him as a well-balanced trio. Since then, Union City has been implementing PGC with fidelity and incredible success, with George and his co-advisor Ms. Grady at the helm. "Union City is a gift, they trust their teachers to make decisions, like they did with PGC. They took the chance and it worked. All you need to make PGC successful is commitment and advisors that are willing to put in the work. We are the district that said it would work, and it has worked all these years."

PGC's Lasting Impact

For George, PGC is so much more than a program: it is an experience that creates positive ripple effects well beyond the school day or high school year. "I still get together with my peer leaders from across the years. They'll say, 'hey, we need to get together, it's time' and when we do, we always start off by sitting in a circle...it's just in us." He's seen students go on from high school to utilize their leadership skills in so many ways... from working in residence life to navigating new relationships in work and college, and more.

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One of his favorite stories to tell is of a student named Edward who, during his senior year, was working at the Shoprite customer service counter and used an activity structure from the PGC curriculum to deescalate a situation with an irate customer. When it worked, he triumphantly reported the breakthrough back to his fellow peer leaders.

In his own life, George and his wife, who was also a trained PGC faculty member, thought about the power of names because of an activity from the curriculum called What's in a Name as they named their own children. Truly, there is no aspect of the program that hasn't had some impact on George's personal and professional trajectory.

CSS is so incredibly grateful for this remarkable educator and person, who has selflessly used his program experience to be a light for so many young people who have followed in and out of the classroom.