



## Restorative Practices: Approaches at the Intersection of School Discipline and School Mental Health

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Federal initiatives like Project AWARE offer State and Local Education Agencies the unique opportunity to reconsider and revise their schools' approaches to supporting the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of their students. Restorative practices, a diverse and multi-tiered set of classroom and school-based strategies that emphasize the importance of the relational needs of the community in fostering student accountability for behavior, have piqued the interest of educators and school-based mental health providers alike. Interest across child-serving personnel has been stoked by emerging evidence that restorative practices reduce exclusionary discipline practices while also improving students' social and emotional wellbeing and school connectedness. This Now Is The Time Issue Brief describes the context surrounding this growing popularity of restorative practices, provides an introduction to different types of restorative practices, and provides a universal start-up guide for implementing restorative practices in schools.

### Serving the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs of Young People in Schools: Current Challenges

**Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs of School-Aged Young People.** All young people need support to build skills for understanding complex internal emotional experiences and for regulating emotions effectively to navigate their social worlds. Among the most in need of social and emotional supports are young people coping with traumatic life experiences and those living with mental illness. Approximately one in six school-aged children experiences impairments in their life functioning due to a diagnosable mental health disorder and an estimated 70% of children have experienced some type of trauma (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007; Perou, et al., 2013). Coping with the



impact of trauma and mental illness places cognitive and emotional demands on young people that can reduce access to education by increasing school absences and by interfering with the cognitive and behavioral processes (e.g., controlling attention, short term memory, persisting on challenging tasks) required for classroom learning (Bücker et al., 2012; Purvis, Milton, Harlow, Paris, & Cross, 2014).

Less than half of young people who suffer from mental illness receive treatment (Kessler, Amminger, Aguilar-Gaxiola, Alonso, Lee, & Ustun, 2007) and, as a consequence, they experience greater impairments in life functioning over time as they struggle to meet social, emotional, and behavioral demands in their family, school, and neighborhood environments (McGorry, Purcell, Goldstone, & Amminger, 2011). What is more, young people with mental illnesses are more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system; 60% of young people in juvenile detention have a diagnosable mental illness (Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002). Because they



are often the only points of contact between young people and the community, schools are of critical importance to efforts to improve young peoples' access to preventative social, emotional, and mental health supports.

**School Disorder: Hurting not Healing.** Most concerned citizens would agree that schools should be secure places where young peoples' social, emotional, and behavioral health needs can be addressed. Unfortunately, violence, bullying, and other disruptions in schools create conditions that weather interpersonal relationships and interfere with learning (Nansel et al., 2003). The conventional approach to addressing violence, bullying, and other school disruptions, including minor infractions (e.g., dress code violations), is to exclude students via school-administered punishments, such as suspensions and expulsions. Children and young people with disabilities, including emotional and behavioral disabilities; students who are learning English; and Black, Hispanic, and American Indian young people have been disproportionately suspended from school for minor infractions (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, 2011; Sullivan, Van Norman, & Klingbeil, 2014). The evidence against these approaches is overwhelming; not only do they not work to reduce the behavior for which they are administered, but they serve and contribute to systemic bias that further isolates and alienates children who are in need of support for learning skills for regulating emotions and effectively managing interpersonal conflict (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008). Despite the evidence against them, many public schools in the United States still use punitive, exclusionary discipline as a primary strategy for addressing perceived student misconduct.

## Restorative Practices: A Proposed Response

Researchers, private non-profit and philanthropic organizations, and several government agencies have expressed grave concern over the impact of trauma, mental illness, and school exclusion on young people, and have issued a call for innovative approaches that will improve mental health, decrease school exclusion, and decrease rates of juvenile incarceration. Restorative practices, a diverse and multi-tiered set of classroom and school-based strategies that emphasize the importance of the relational needs of the community in fostering student accountability for behavior, is one emerging response (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Restorative practices are founded upon the concept that both individuals and relationships must heal after harm occurs in the school community. With roots in indigenous and Mennonite cultures, restorative practices uphold the concept that humans are social and communal and need to learn and grow through relationship and community. The philosophy behind restorative practices acknowledges that children and young people who are involved in bullying, violence, and school disruptions are themselves feeling unsafe and in need of an opportunity to reattach and reengage.

Restorative practices are based on the premise that individuals and/or groups in conflict benefit from working together to find resolutions and repair the resultant damage caused to their relationship. Restorative practices focus on the relationship between the perpetrator of the "crime" (i.e., incident requiring disciplinary response) and members of the school community, including victims, bystanders, and their families. Restorative practices are designed to open up dialogue, give everyone an opportunity to be heard, and allow those impacted by harm to determine resolutions collaboratively.

## Benefits of Restorative Practices

Large-scale, rigorous research on the effects of restorative practices on school-related outcomes is underway and results are forthcoming. In the meantime, promising results are being reported from school districts across the United States. Reported outcomes include fewer disciplinary actions and reduced numbers of exclusionary suspensions and expulsions. Although reducing exclusionary discipline practices is critical for increasing equitable access to schooling, proponents of restorative

practices underscore that their implementation has further reaching consequences for student wellbeing. Many believe that restorative practices improve the social and emotional wellbeing of young people by addressing the root causes of student misbehavior, such as distressed social relationships and lack of school connectedness, thereby reducing the need for the behavior rather than simply punishing it. Following this logic, proponents argue that implementing restorative practices in schools leads to improved student perceptions of school climate (e.g., perceived safety and relationships between and among students and teachers), and improved social and emotional skills (e.g., empathy and perspective taking).

Restorative practices are also purported to benefit school adults by providing them an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of students' life experiences, giving them insight into the reasons for students' behaviors and fostering empathy that might result in alternative, non-disciplinary responses. The goal is to change school adults' interpretation of students' behavior from "this student is being oppositional and defiant", to "this student is feeling unsafe and/or emotionally overwhelmed."

**School Climate Improvement:** Restorative practices require schools to be explicit and thoughtful about the norms and rules to which all community members hold one another accountable, so should a community member break a norm or rule, there is shared understanding of the need for, and effect of, the community's response (Karp & Breslin, 2001). As a consequence of this process, replacing reactionary, punitive discipline practices with restorative practices may contribute to improvements in school climate by involving all parties in conflict resolution through a fair process; repairing relationships and trust; and sharing views and experiences in order to cultivate empathy for others in the school community (McClusky, et al., 2008).

**Social and Emotional Skill Development:** Finding their voice and expressing the emotions that accompany a harmful incident – sadness, fear, anger, loneliness, regret – are believed to benefit individuals at all levels of exposure, including both victim(s) and perpetrator(s), as well as the network of peers, teachers, and family members with whom they interact. Beyond improving discipline practices, restorative practices offer opportunities for students and staff to develop relational skills with one another, contributing to the development of the

key twenty-first century skills (e.g., communication, collaboration, cooperation) young people need to be successful in college, career, and life.

Since students living with mental health-related illnesses often experience social and emotional skill deficits that leave them isolated or cut off from the larger school population, it stands to reason that restorative practices would provide a long-needed opportunity to be acknowledged within the school community, thereby increasing the chance that others will respond with empathy and social support. For schools aiming to heighten adult awareness of young people with mental health needs, restorative practices offer an opportunity for school adults to compassionately learn about the life context of young persons living with mental illness and to respond with treatment supports, ultimately increasing the number of school-aged young people who receive much-needed intervention.

### ***Benefits of Restorative Practices: Snapshots From the Field***

Restorative practices are being implemented with promising results in several education agencies throughout the United States, including:

- Oakland, CA: Cole Middle School reduced suspensions by 87% in its first year of restorative practice implementation. Today nearly two dozen Oakland schools have similar programs, which have been shown to reduce fighting and help improve relationships.
- Ypsilanti, MI: After its 2012 implementation of restorative practices, Ypsilanti High School reported averting 98 days of suspension. 87% of students said they had learned to better manage conflicts.
- Longmont, CO: A pilot program that works with the local police department diverted 91 court referrals and saved 172 suspension days between August 2010 and May 2012.
- Philadelphia, PA: West Philadelphia High School experienced a 50% decrease in suspensions, and a 52% reduction in violent and serious acts during the 2007/08 school year as a result of implementing restorative circles. Other Pennsylvania schools had significant reductions in fighting, cafeteria violations, misbehavior, detention, theft, classroom disruptions and suspensions after implementing restorative conferencing, circles and other practices.
- Chicago, IL: Chicago Public Schools experienced a reduction of 1,000 suspension days after successful implementation of restorative peer juries.



## Restorative Practices in Schools: One Purpose, Many Approaches

Several types of Restorative Practices exist, including: restorative justice, community conferencing, community services, peer juries, circle processes, conflict prevention and resolution programs, informal restorative practices, and social-emotional learning (Toolbox B, Restorative Practices Grid). Although Restorative Practices are diverse in nature, they are all designed for the same set of purposes: to repair relationships and trust, as opposed to distribute retribution or punishment; to improve involvement of all parties in conflict resolution using fair practices; and to improve the social fabric of the school by sharing views and experiences and developing empathy for others in the school community (McClusky, et al., 2008). To this point, in her review of 95 organizations implementing Restorative Practices in Illinois public schools, Burke (2013) noted that schools shifted their approach to student misconduct in that students were held accountable “not a merely [for] the violation of a rule but a violation against people and relationships in the school and wider community” (p.10). Whether it is applied to conflicts between students, students and school adults, or between school adults, the goal of any restorative practice is for all involved parties to feel valued and heard, and to reestablish positive interpersonal connections. In all cases, restorative practices involve adult guidance and stewarding, allowing adults the opportunity to be in conversation with young people and to provide mentorship (Noguera, 2003). Toolbox A displays examples of universal prompts for initiating conversations aligned with restorative practices.

### Toolbox A. Universal Prompts for Restorative Dialogue

1. From your point of view what happened? Share how you experienced things.
2. What do you remember thinking at the time of the incident? What were you aiming for?
3. Who was affected by the incident? How have you and others been affected?
4. What has been hardest for you?
5. What feelings or needs are still with you? What else do you want to express?
6. What would you like to happen next? What do you think will help make things right? What will help keep things right? Anything you want to ask for? Anything you want to offer?

*Adapted from: San Francisco Unified School District Restorative Questions and San Lorenzo Unified School District Restorative Questions*

Restorative practices in schools can be implemented as a whole-school approach, involving universal training of staff and students in principles of restorative practices; and it can also be implemented as an add-on strategy to respond to behavioral incidents or ongoing conflict. Experts tend to report that the whole-school approach is most successful in making a difference because, among other reasons, it requires training for all members of the school community, such as custodial staff, food service staff, bus drivers, guidance counselors, classroom aides, support staff, teachers, and administrators (Guckenberger, Hurley, Persson, Fronius, & Petrosino, 2015).

### Toolbox B. Restorative Practices Grid

Restorative Practice Type <sup>1</sup>	Description	Link to Social & Emotional Skills	Related Key Resources
Circle Processes	Circles are one of the most commonly recognized restorative practices. Circles are facilitated jointly by students and staff. School staff are trained to ask questions that open up dialogue, give everyone an opportunity to be heard, and allow those impacted by harm to determine resolutions collaboratively. Circles can be applied to different contexts. For instance, some schools employ proactive or intervention circles amongst staff and faculty during meetings as a means to create cohesion and community between adults.	Circles give young people language for social problem solving and facilitates empathy and trust building. Collective efficacy is cultivated when a group of young people collaborates to develop solutions for problems that affect them.	San Francisco USD Restorative Practices Whole School Implementation Guide <a href="http://www.healthiersf.org">www.healthiersf.org</a>  Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide For Schools, Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority <a href="http://www.icjia.state.il.us">www.icjia.state.il.us</a>

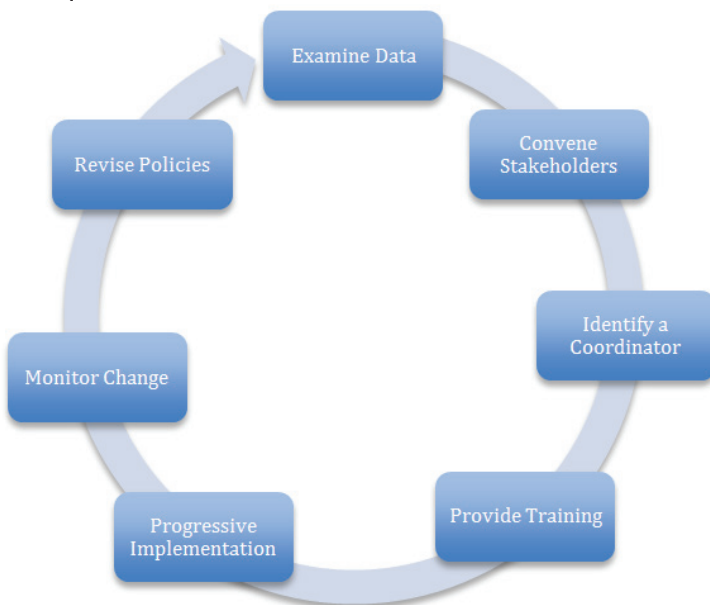
<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: The Advancement Project (2014)

Restorative Practice Type <sup>1</sup>	Description	Link to Social & Emotional Skills	Related Key Resources
Youth Courts	Also known as peer juries, teen courts, or peer courts, youth courts empower young people to adjudicate non-violent disciplinary infractions. Young people conduct peer-sentencing, allowing peers to take responsibility and make restitution, often in the form of community service, in order to heal harm caused to the school community.	Provides the opportunity for young people to apply the principles of restorative conversations to a real-world context that reinforces cause and effect and builds social and emotional vocabulary.	National Association of Youth Courts: <a href="http://www.youngpeoplecourt.net">www.youngpeoplecourt.net</a>
Social-Emotional Learning	Social emotional learning programs and practices, which include conflict prevention and resolution practices and programs, are designed to increase self-awareness, social awareness, interpersonal relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills.	Young people learn to recognize and regulate emotions, including those that harm self or others, and to use behaviors that are effective for improving wellbeing.	Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning <a href="http://www.CASEL.org">www.CASEL.org</a>

## Launching Restorative Practices in Your School

Although restorative practices are diverse in nature, effective implementation follows a standard sequence (Figure 1, Restorative Practices Implementation Sequence<sup>2</sup>).

Figure 1. Restorative Practices Implementation Sequence



**Examine School Climate Data.** Data examination is critical to understand the full scope of the challenge facing the school, although restorative practices should be considered whether or not disparities exist.

Tips for Data Examination:

- Identify and collect various sources of school climate data, including student, staff, and parent survey data, as well as data related to office

discipline referrals, truancy, and suspensions and expulsions.

- Disaggregate school climate data by race, gender, and disability.
- Examine whether disparities exist in the school's school climate perceptions and discipline practices based on race, gender, or disability.

**Convene Stakeholders.** Convene school personnel, families, students, and community partners to discuss school climate data and build a coalition that will provide a strong foundation for restorative practices.

Tips for Convening Stakeholders:

- Invite all interested parties.
- Share school climate data and solicit interpretations and feedback.
- Introduce restorative practices and solicit input about how they might fit into ongoing school efforts.
- Log stakeholder concerns and anticipated barriers in order to address them at future stages of implementation.

**Identify a Coordinator.** Identify a restorative practices coordinator and build time into his/her work schedule to manage implementation and training. The most appropriate person for the position will be a committed and passionate member of the school community who is seen as a leader among staff members, students, and family members.

**Provide Training.** Through a series of 'preview' sessions, introduce restorative practices early in the school year to as many staff members as possible. To prepare for implementation, train a small group to facilitate restorative practices. To ensure that implementation-related learning becomes institutional

<sup>2</sup>Adapted from: Davis (2014)

knowledge, create a school-wide learning community for continual reflection throughout the school year on the restorative practice approach.

#### Tips for Effective Training:

- Implement trainings that are district-approved and culturally competent.
- Provide trainees with guidance on how to integrate restorative practices within other district and school-initiated programs and frameworks.
- Begin with adults. For example, employ practices (like circles) in faculty meetings.
- Identify early adopters. Encourage school adults who are interested and motivated to pilot restorative.

**Progressive Implementation:** Implement restorative practices in stages, rather than all at once.

1. **Conduct classroom-level implementation.** With coaching from the restorative practices coordinator, have staff members practice restorative conversation methods in various contexts (e.g., hallway, cafeteria, playground, classroom) and for various purposes (e.g., community building, brief check-in at start of class, celebration).
2. **Institute restorative discipline.** After conducting a scan of available resources that schools can offer in place of exclusionary discipline (e.g., individual and small group therapeutic supports, community service opportunities), begin using

restorative practices for disciplinary infractions and for students returning from suspension, expulsion, or incarceration.

3. **Partner with students in implementing peer restorative practices.** Train students to help conduct restorative conversations. Help adults develop capacity to share responsibility and control with young people and enable young people to partner authentically with adults to improve the effectiveness of restorative practices in the school.

**Monitor Change.** In order to monitor implementation, consider using a tracking log to document restorative interventions and results. After several months of implementation, reexamine school climate data to determine if any change has occurred. Disaggregated school climate data to determine if restorative practices have had a unique impact on any student subgroup in particular.

**Revise Policies.** When implementation tracking logs and school climate data suggest that restorative practices are having promising effects and should be taken to scale, revise school policies to reflect the organization's endorsement. Consider revising all documents that relate to school safety and school behavior, including but not limited to school board policies and student codes of conduct. Toolbox C displays examples of school policies reflecting restorative practices.

### ***Toolbox C. Example Restorative Practice-Related Policies***

#### **Example 1: Safe and Supportive Schools Policy in the San Francisco Unified School District, Excerpt**

"SFUSD's leadership in positive, evidence-based alternatives to school discipline, includes its 2009 adoption of resolution 96-23A1, "In Support of a Comprehensive School Climate, Restorative Justice and Alternatives to Suspensions & Expulsions" with the goal that: -students will learn to accept responsibility, repair the harm their actions caused, recognize their role in maintaining a safe school environment, build upon their personal relationships in the school and contribute as a positive member of the school community; -an improved sense of community will significantly decrease the need for suspensions, expulsions, and time that students are excluded from instruction due to behavior infractions."

#### **Example 2: Chicago Public Schools Student Code of Conduct, Excerpt**

"The Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Student Code of Conduct (SCC) supports our schools in maintaining safe, nurturing, participatory and productive learning environments. In order to maximize learning time and promote positive behaviors, every school must establish multi-tiered systems of support for students' social, emotional and behavioral needs. This includes developing clear expectations, teaching social-emotional competencies, and fostering positive relationships among all members of the school community. Chicago Public Schools is committed to an instructive, corrective, and restorative approach to behavior. If behavior incidents arise that threaten student and staff safety or severely disrupt the educational process, the response should minimize the impact of the incident, repair harm, and address the underlying needs behind student behaviors. In accordance with the SCC, all disciplinary responses must be applied respectfully, fairly, consistently, and protect students' rights to instructional time whenever possible."

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