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RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS – AN INTRODUCTION

Schools and school districts around the country are turning to restorative justice practices as an alternative to harsh exclusionary discipline practices. Restorative *justice* is a philosophy, rather than a specific program or curriculum, which focuses on repairing the harm done when a member of a community violates the standards of conduct. Restorative *practices* include a variety of methods used to uphold the philosophy. In many cases, educators use restorative practices not only when harm is done, but also as a preventive tool to help members of the school community build healthy and positive relationships and address needs and challenges as they arise.

Background

Restorative justice rests on the idea that problems and conflict can be more effectively resolved using a restorative rather than a punitive approach. It allows those who have caused harm and who have been harmed to come together to discuss, resolve and 'repair' the harm done.

Changes in School Culture

A restorative approach often requires a cultural shift for the entire school community; educators must shift to see students as persons deserving of the opportunity to correct their wrongdoings and to learn from their mistakes, rather than as children in need of reprimand; and students must shift to be more accountable for their behavior and willing to come together with the person they harmed or were harmed by to make amends. While this approach may be more time and energy consuming than traditional approaches to discipline, it has the potential to significantly strengthen school climate. It is rooted in positive relationships and behaviors and helps create a supportive environment where students thrive personally and academically.

Levels of Implementation

Restorative practices can be used as a targeted approach or as a tiered, whole-school approach. Using a targeted approach, restorative intervention practices are reserved for select students who have violated school rules. Only students involved in conflict or those who violate rules or who have been harmed have access to the restorative practices. In the targeted approach, not all students receive the benefits of the restorative process, which can aid students in building positive relationships and trust among peers and teachers. In a tiered, whole-school approach, all students benefit from the restorative philosophy and receive supports that help to prevent harm, resolve conflict and restore positive relationships. The whole school restorative approach aids teachers and staff in building a better understanding of their students and fostering a classroom and school environment that is safe, supportive, and nurturing.

Examples of Restorative Justice Practices

- **_Circles_**, also called peacemaking circles, is a practice that brings together members of the school community in a safe space to achieve a variety of outcomes, such as relationship building, problem solving, conflict resolution, healing, and support. As a problem-solving tool, circles may involve students and staff in a particular grade or class coming together in a circle to discuss a specific challenge facing the school or grade/class (e.g. attendance, bullying). Circles can also bring individuals together who were involved in a conflict to resolve and repair the harm done. As a preventive and proactive tool, circles can bring students together to improve active and empathetic listening, enhance communication, build community and strengthen trust. Circles can be used as daily 'check-ins' to allow students to express how they are feeling each day. Most circles conducted in the school setting include trained staff or 'circle keepers' to help encourage

individuals to participate and share their feelings and points of view on the topic or issue of discussion. Often a small symbolic object is used as a talking piece that is passed around the circle to allow each person a turn to speak, which helps to encourage respect and active listening for everyone in the circle. Circles, then, are used as both a prevention and intervention tool for everyone in the school community.

- **_Mediation_** brings together students involved in a conflict to discuss the dilemma and address any underlying issues at the root of the dispute. A mediation generally just includes the two or more students who were directly involved in the dispute. Mediation sessions between students should always include a trained facilitator/ mediator to help the students hash out their concerns and reach a consensus on how to peacefully move forward. Peer mediation allows students to be trained as volunteers in restorative problem-solving and serve as mediators. Students often play a critical role in the mediation process by assisting their peers in resolving conflict. Mediation is a great tool for addressing minor infractions and issues before they develop into more serious incidents.

- **_Peer jury_** (also called teen, youth or peer court) is a youth-led practice where a panel of students hears cases involving minor infractions of their peers. As with mediation, a trained adult facilitator should oversee the student panel as it works with the referred student to develop a plan and course of action for repairing the harm done and making the situation right. The student panel may decide to refer the student to specific school-based or community-based services to address whatever needs the referred student may have. Student volunteers that serve on the jury should be representative of the student body.

- **_Restorative conferences_** bring together all persons involved in a conflict and those who were harmed by the conflict to reconcile and contribute to finding an appropriate response that will repair the harm and/ or relationship. The conference includes the person that was harmed, the person that did the harm, and any parents or friends who may have been affected by the incident. A trained staff member moderates the conference, but is not an active participant. Together the group reaches a consensus to repair the harm and generally a contract is signed or a verbal agreement is made.

- **_Follow-up_** with students is important to ensure promises are kept and students are held accountable to the program/ action plan they agreed upon to repair the harm done. Staff may have follow-up circles, meetings, or check-ins after a restorative activity, and may decide to include specific follow-up protocols in the action plan.

Important Considerations When Engaging in Restorative Justice

- Professional development workshops should be offered on the restorative justice philosophy and practices for school staff. This will ensure teachers and staff are ready and able to successfully implement the restorative practices.

- Educators should bolster meaningful engagement among students involved in conflict by instituting a cooling off period prior to using the restorative practice to allow students to calm down, reflect, and process the situation.

- Action plans and agreements emerging from the restorative practice should follow the SMART guidelines (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound). This will help ensure students carry out the agreements.

- The school should keep, train, and retain a core group of skilled facilitators to coordinate the restorative practices and address needs as they arise in order to ensure sustainability.

School and District Information on Restorative Justice

- City Springs Elementary/ Middle School (Maryland)
- Palmer High School (Colorado)
- Parkrose Middle School (Oregon)
- Oakland Unified School District (California)
- San Francisco Unified School District (California)
- Napa Valley Unified School District (California)
- Vallejo City Unified School District (California)
- Hayward Unified School District (California)
- Lansing School District (Michigan)

Evaluations of Restorative Justice in Schools and School Districts:

- School-based restorative justice as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies: Lessons from West Oakland.
- Denver Public Schools Restorative Justice Program, Final Report, 2008-2009.
- International Institute for Restorative Practices (2009). Findings from schools implementing Restorative Practices.

To learn more, check out these resources:

- The International Institute for Restorative Practices
- Restorative Works, Learning Network
- Restorative Justice: A working guide for our schools

Sources:
Ashley, J. and Burke, K. (2009). Implementing restorative justice: A guide for schools. Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Retrieved at
http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL%20BARJ%20GUIDEBOOOK.pdf

Kidde, J. and Alfred, R. (2011). Restorative Justice: A working guide for our schools. School Health Services Coalition. Alameda County Health Care Services Agency. Retrieved at
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'Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships and Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools' by American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Advancement Project and the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, March 2014. Retrieved at
http://www.otlcampaign.org/sites/default/files/restorative-practices-guide.pdf

Wachtel, T. (2013). Defining Restorative. The International Institute for Restorative Practices. Retrieved at
http://www.iirp.edu/pdf/Defining-Restorative.pdf