

## Overcoming Barriers to Restorative Practices Implementation: What District Leaders Can Do

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### Abstract

Restorative practices (RP) are increasingly written into discipline policy. RP has demonstrated improvements in school discipline, relationships, and climate but implementation challenges exist. This qualitative study explores these challenges with ten district personnel. Data were transcribed and coded by three authors. Five themes emerged from thematic analysis by all authors: investments (i.e., in training, coaching, and time), supportive state and local policy, data and accountability (i.e., to examine implementation and outcomes), shifted mindsets and school culture, and alignment (i.e., with other district initiatives). Key challenges included limited resources and capacity, incompatible belief systems, lacking policy clarity and practice guidelines, and too many siloed initiatives. To improve scaling and sustainability, participants sought clear implementation and evaluation guidance, alignment, and training networks.

### Key Words

restorative practices, implementation drivers, implementation barriers, qualitative research, district interviews, practitioner needs

## Introduction

There is emerging policy and practice interest in Restorative Justice in K-12 schools. In criminal justice, Restorative Justice (RJ) shifts traditional methods of crime response to an approach defined by restoring or repairing harm, engaging the community in developing resolutions, and supporting re-entry into the community (United Nations, 2003). The adaptation of RJ within the educational context, often referred to as Restorative Practices (RP), focuses on achieving school safety while maintaining an inclusive school culture built on strong relationships (Fronius et al., 2019). As of 2020, 21 states adopted laws noting implementation of school-based RJ/RP as an alternative to exclusionary discipline (Georgetown Law, 2020).

This policy approach contrasts with “zero tolerance” policies that mapped specific safety-related behavioral infractions to exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions, expulsions) responses due to concerns about drugs and violence in schools (i.e., in tandem with the criminal justice War on Drugs in the 1980s). Over time, these “zero tolerance” responses came to be used for non-safety infractions, including relational concerns like disobedience and disrespect (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Of growing concern is the high frequency of their use, systematic inequities in their use based on student race and ethnicity, and the increasingly clear link between schools’ use of exclusionary discipline and subsequent youth criminal justice involvement and incarceration, often described as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (e.g., Hemez et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2014). This has resulted in increasing attention toward RP as a potential solution by school districts.

In education, RP consists of both preventive practices to foster healthy relationships within learning communities and responsive practices that can repair damage

caused by harmful incidents (Song & Swearer, 2016). A core prevention tenet is that authentic relationships between students and teachers will shift interactions positively and promote improved student engagement.

To create these foundational relationships, there is universal and regular engagement in a community building circle (CBC) where youth and teachers share personal ideas, perspectives, and experiences in response to specific prompts, while sitting in a circle and utilizing a “talking stick” to promote power-sharing and engaged listening (McCluskey, 2018).

It is hypothesized that these preventive practices lay an important foundation for responsive practices. RP response to incidents include restorative dialogue, when minor issues are addressed informally to avoid wider conflict often using a set of five open-ended questions, and restorative conferences, where parties in conflict convene for reconciliation with a practitioner to repair harm and determine appropriate sanctions for the person who perpetrated (Fronius et al., 2019).

Though most of the early research focused on responsive practices (Fronius et al., 2019), recent rigorous studies testing preventive school-wide practices demonstrate reductions in overall discipline incidents, and improved relationships and climate (Augustine et al., 2018; Bonell et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2022) though not all studies show these impacts (Acosta et al., 2019).

Further, research about implementation research has lagged, particularly in relation to large scale efforts (Fronius et al., 2019), leaving unanswered questions for districts on how to best support implementation. There are also gaps with policy. Despite the promise of these preventive RP practices, only a couple of states’

laws frame RJ/RP as a whole school and preventive approach where nearly all focus on RP as a responsive action (Georgetown Law, 2020).

“Implementation science,” which has emerged to better understand the factors related to successful and unsuccessful implementation of interventions across contexts, is a useful lens for RP implementation research. Implementation science documents barriers and drivers of implementation that are organizational in nature (e.g., structures that facilitate or act as barriers), individual (e.g., beliefs, knowledge, efficacy, competency), and practice/framework features (e.g., see Scaccia et al., 2015; Han & Weiss, 2005, NIRN, 2015) that are applicable to RP. This field has emerged in response to the challenges that a wide range of fields, including education and physical, behavioral, and mental health, face with implementation.

### Current study

Applying implementation science to RP implementation, it is expected that a range of organization, person, and framework-specific factors relate to implementation challenges. To examine this explicitly, we engaged key informants across a state with a law supporting a shift to preventive restorative approaches about their districts’ implementation experiences.

Our research questions were:

- (1) How do districts support implementation in schools?
- (2) What are facilitators of implementation?
- (3) What are the challenges of implementation?
- (4) What are the resources needed to support implementation of restorative practices?

This study fills important research and practice guideline gaps by elucidating ways key education leaders can scale and sustain RP

efforts by anticipating challenges and needs for implementation.

## Method

### Study context

In 2019, the state assembly passed a law requiring that “restorative approaches” be integrated into each local education agency’s discipline policy. This arose from state concerns that schools were excluding too many students, especially minoritized students, with out-of-school suspensions and the impacts this had on student engagement and the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba et al., 2014).

While the law provided a range of “restorative approaches,” we were specifically interested in RP. The state has county-based districts which range in size, with the smallest school system consisting of five schools serving about 1,700 students and the largest with 210 schools serving over 160,000 students.

### Participants

District personnel whose job duties included supervising and/or overseeing training, technical assistance, coaching, or other support for RP in schools served as key informants.

There were five participating districts with ten key informants in total. For two of the districts, only one key informant attended, there were two key informants present for two districts, and one district had four informants present. Most personnel had a coordinator or director role, and some had decision-making power with modest budgets allocated to RP. None had direct supervisory roles over school leaders or teachers.

Districts were selected to represent the geography of the state (i.e., including urban, suburban, rural, and fringe communities), the range of district sizes (i.e., small to large, where

the extremes were not included), and the known number or years since beginning RP implementation. The lead author conducted the interviews with another university partner.

### **Qualitative method**

The study used focus group interviews to collect data rooted in a blended paradigm of pragmatist and constructivist philosophies (Savin-Baden & Sajor, 2014). Drawing upon the pragmatist philosophy, we aimed to address a practice-driven research question and balance different qualitative analytic approaches (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Utilizing interviews and multiple analyses (see below) allowed the method to center on participant experiences, aligning to the constructivist philosophy.

### **Data collection procedure**

Qualitative data were collected in late 2021 with five districts through either a focus group or individual interview following a single protocol. Questions elicited input about organization, implementer, and programmatic barriers and facilitators related to training and ongoing support procedures, budgets, data collection, implementation successes, challenges and areas for growth, alignment of multiple “restorative approaches,” and RP-supportive district and state infrastructure. The interviews were conducted using a conversational style (Krueger, 2014). This study was deemed non-human subjects research by the authors’ Institutional Review Board.

### **Data analysis**

Audio recordings were transcribed by Rev.com and the lead author de-identified all transcripts before review. The lead and two other authors read all transcripts three times: once for holistic understanding, once for coding/tagging content, and a third time to identify categories or themes (Elliott, 2018). Our thematic analysis blended inductive and deductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We had specific research

questions that anchored the codes (i.e., support provided and needed, barriers, and facilitators) without a priori coding dictionary. Coders did so independently and then extracted codes into a new document for discussion by the three authors. These data were then re-read by the lead and second author multiple times, working both independently and collaboratively through discussion, to distill coded data, refine themes and sub-themes, and thereby re-organize the data. At this point, we noted how final themes related to known implementation science theories, following more of a deductive approach.

### **Positionality**

As researcher identities, experiences, and training impact how we interpret qualitative data, we include a positionality statement for all authors to provide context. The first author is a white female research faculty member and school psychologist whose research focuses on state-wide implementation of school-based prevention. The second author is a white female with experience as an educator and public health researcher focused on eliminating disparities in health and education. The third author is a white male with experience in comprehensive and therapeutic schooling environments who researches school-based mental health. The fourth author is a Black female public health researcher and graduate student who studies the intersection of mental health, social justice, and environmental factors.

### **Results**

Five themes related to all research questions were extracted from the thematic analysis and included: 1) investments, 2) supportive state and local policy, 3) data and accountability, 4) shifted mindsets and school culture, and 5) alignment. Some of these themes contained multiple sub-themes and many are interrelated.

## Investments

Participants shared the importance of investing time and resources into training and coaching. Investments were context-dependent and related to district size, scaling approach, and years since implementation launch.

### Training and coaching with external partners

Participants named the value of partnerships in providing training and ongoing coaching to schools and the limited capacity of schools and districts to implement independently.

Most districts partnered with external organizations for training, and each provided some internal support. One school district described integrating training with other priorities (e.g., multi-tiered system of supports). Some districts had a train-the-trainers model, and others had a coaching model with school-based champions/coordinators. One district leader explained that following an external training, they used a train-the-trainer model “so we built our capacity immediately.

So, we trained 12 trainers and then like really started doing lots of trainings” for school-based professionals. Participants also talked about district training, including “one of the goals that we have as a district team is to build capacity in the district, just in their knowledge of what restorative practices is.” They also expressed thinking critically about how to invest in and expand coaching efforts.

An avenue identified was a regional or state-wide network, where one participant reflected, “I’m even wondering; if all of us LEAs [local education agencies] are trying to figure out how do we get more coaching, could we establish two or three times a year where there is some LEA wide trainings for restorative practices? And so, between all the different counties, if we had one person from

each, we could create smaller teams that could do the training.”

### Champions

Participants identified district-level and school-based champions (e.g., administrators, teachers, and social workers) as key players to support implementer buy-in and implementation.

District champions were established through district “positions to this work, which has been instrumental in supporting this process.”

Speaking to school champions, one person described “prior to full building training, we ensured that we had what we call champions. So, we took about an eighth of our staff and trained them ahead of time and let them get comfortable for about a year ... And then we came back with full training, so that the champions could support the rest of their colleagues.”

### Funding

There was variability in how districts paid for training and supports. Most districts voiced uncertainty about long-term funding.

Participants named COVID relief, Title II, and state funds, among others as specific financial tools to support RP implementation. Many identified that clear and consistent funding streams would be helpful. One participant seeking state investment shared, “I think...that if we're required to do it [RP], it can't always fall on the [district] system to pick up the time for it. From a budgetary standpoint... Money's tight.”

### Allocated time

Time was identified as a needed investment to facilitate implementation, and participants spoke to the importance of required time in the school day. Some districts blocked time in the school schedule for teachers to conduct proactive CBCs. They also raised the importance of school-based protected time.

One person shared that at one school, “there are people that want to do other things during that time period and the administrators, and the counselor are adamant. ‘You don’t pull kids; you don’t do testing. You don’t do interventions. This is what the entire school is doing for that first part of the day. And it is sacred and will not be touched.’”

### **Adequate staffing**

Issues with investments in allocated time, training, and funding for RP were exacerbated by high rates of turnover, particularly among leadership, and by teacher shortages following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaking to the impact of turnover, a participant noted “you might have a school where all of your administrators are trained, and you might have a school where no one is trained anymore, because we’ve had that attrition for two years.” Further, some schools and districts struggled to find adequate time to train new teachers and money to compensate them for time spent in training.

### **Supportive State and Local Policy**

State policy and guidelines informed RP implementation. Interviewed districts spoke to how state and local regulations supported their implementation and shared desired state supports to enhance implementation.

### **State regulations**

Most interviewed districts began implementation prior to the 2019 legislation, in response to earlier student conduct guidelines and regulations, particularly related to disproportionality in exclusionary discipline. One participant shared, “the discipline regs in 2000 and I don’t know, ’14, ’15 is when RP first started showing up in some language and we, at that point, I think all kind of put our heads together [about how to shift to RP].” Another district shared how critical the 2019 regulations were to implementing RP: “we were one of the

last few that had not directly embedded restorative approaches, restorative practices in our discipline work. So that was part of my responsibility when I first came on in this role, was to work on that policy, and then really revamp our whole discipline matrix to make sure that this piece was reflected in there.”

### **Desired state policy and regulations**

Participants expressed the need for top-down messaging to support district leaders in gaining buy-in across all personnel and providing clear expectations for practice, noting that vague language created challenges to find a unified vision for this work. One participant noted how it feels critical to have “very, very, very clear messaging straight from [the state department of education], straight from legislature to administrators, that this is the path we’re going in and this is what the path looks like, as opposed to ‘there’s this new thing.’” Another participant shared a need for “some overarching roadmap for [school] systems in terms of what it looks like along the way from an implementation to ... sustainability for folks to be able to see” and asking, “what are some things that are the non-negotiables that need to happen to be considered RP? And how can the state support folks to get there?”

### **Local implementation policies from district and school leaders**

Given the guidance from state regulations, participants spoke to the role of district policies. Multiple participants emphasized the importance of school board and superintendent buy-in to secure needed funding and resources. One shared, “stuff that comes from the top down is going to get implemented as opposed to [district personnel] receiving stuff from the state at our level and go up. So, when your superintendent or your board says, ‘This is what we’re going to do,’ guess what, this is what we’re going to do. And that’s where money gets allocated.”

## Data and Accountability

Participants shared the importance of collecting data to track implementation and to examine the effects of RP and shared consideration of different evaluation efforts. They discussed looking at discipline data, training records, and surveys from external partners. Some spoke to the challenges measuring fidelity and raised concerns that RP was not being implemented as intended. They expressed interest in identifying and utilizing meaningful fidelity and outcome measures. One participant summarized these challenges by saying, “we really want to include the word integrity with the word fidelity, because it's easy to do a checklist. But where are you going to get the integrity piece from? And how can you assess the integrity? It's easy to say, every teacher's doing a circle... but did that impact the culture and climate? Did it impact a feeling of belongingness, a feeling of connectedness, inclusion?”

## Shifted Mindsets and School Culture

There was a repeated discussion about mindset and culture and how that intersected with buy-in and implementation.

### Required shifts

Participants shared that implementing RP required building strong teacher-student relationships that were less hierarchical, representing a shift for many schools and educators, which could be hard to get staff buy-in for. A participant reflected, “I don't know that everybody believes in that power of relationships” illustrating implementer barriers. A leader also noted how a mindset shift was needed for moving away from exclusionary discipline: “we're not trying to get rid of kids here. There's no getting rid of them. Like that's part of that reframing of restorative...they're coming back to you. And it's never the goal to get rid of them ... so that is a very different mindset than what those conversations looked like before I came into this role.” They also spoke about how schools have long focused

strictly on academics and RP represented a shift from that too. One participant shared, “for the first time in 25 years, we as a [school] system are looking at social emotional learning as just as big a priority as academic learning” indicating how new this approach was for schools.

Further, they shared that RP implementation can dynamically shape and inform school culture. “After going to the four-day training, it really showed me that this is really about creating a climate and a culture. It's not about just stopping suspensions.” Another reflected on how RP shifted culture among teachers outside of the classroom as well. “This started out [as] a focus on the school-to-prison pipeline and reducing exclusionary discipline for students, but it has quickly become much more about adults.” And continued, “it has grown to include adult satisfaction in their jobs and ability to work together.”

### Tools and activities that influence mindset

Participants spoke about strategies to support mindset shifts including thoughtfully selecting who to train, creating incentive systems, and providing space for adults to engage in restorative practices themselves. One district shared how just exposing people to the practices could shift their approach with youth, while also talking about engaging *all* adults. One person highlighted their engagement of school resource officers and said: “If I can get cops to do circles, even if it's instructional circles in their DARE class, and they can see the benefits of it ... And then the five questions, if you give the five questions to a cop, that changes their whole investigation strategy.” Another district collaborated with external partners to build administrator buy-in with regular administrator circles and noted how much the administrators appreciated it. “Some of those circles, they're still meeting on their own ... They love the space that was created for them. And it just organically grew into

something else that some of the cohorts continue to meet.” To incentivize training, one district “paid people to come and get the training, which of course when you pay people to come for a training, you get all walks of life. But that's also interesting because people who wouldn't necessarily sign up for that are like ‘Oh, well I need [professional development or PD credits] ...’ And it's [a state department of education PD] credit. So, we make it one [state] credit and they get paid to come and so that's very enticing to people.”

### Alignment

Because the state law listed a range of “restorative approaches” (of which, RP was one), most districts were implementing many other approaches in tandem with RP, including social emotional learning (SEL), trauma-informed care, and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and struggled to align them. Participants reflected on the importance of alignment and recognized that there were too many siloed initiatives. A participant shared, “we had asked [schools] for a PBIS action plan [and] in the spring, we asked for the RP action plan. So, another thing that we'll have to work through is how many different action plans do [they] need? Because ultimately a lot of this stuff should be under one umbrella of planning.”

As a solution, many districts built restorative practices into their multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Given the state's long history building PBIS infrastructure, they shared that they leveraged the concepts taught in PBIS about the need for data, systems, and practices to support RP implementation and outcomes. One participant said, “prior to all of this starting, PBIS had been in place for quite a long time in the district and so...that's been an integral piece of anchoring the work we're doing now to work that's been done for a long time through the PBIS framework.” Another participant described the natural alignment of

RP to PBIS initiatives: “restorative practices isn't a new thing to add to your plate. It's the plate with which you put everything else on.” Other leaders shared similar sentiments about RP's deep ties to SEL, mental health supports, and trauma-informed approaches, all efforts that have received increased attention by districts in recent years.

### Discussion

The themes that emerged indicate that implementation of RP is complex and multilayered with several facilitators and barriers to implementation. As evidenced in the number of sub-themes and quotes, investments followed by policy were main topics of multifaceted discussion. Discussion of mindsets and culture threaded through many discussion and related to programmatic features and buy-in. Data and alignment were discussed in all interviews but to a lesser degree. In looking to the field of implementation science, most themes map well to the “implementation drivers” identified for school-based implementation by the National

Implementation Research Network (NIRN, 2015). These drivers include: (1) competency (i.e., features that promote individuals' abilities to implement), which participants discussed as barriers with teacher and leader buy-in and the school culture, (2) organization (i.e., infrastructural features that reduce implementation barriers, track progress, and provide needed investments and supports), which participants described as barriers and facilitators of investments as well as in their described need for better data and alignment, and (3) leadership (i.e., the people and strategies that promote and sustain implementation), which participants referenced through discussions of champions and offering opportunities for training.

Participants also identified clear gaps and concerns for district and state leaders to

address. These included sources of funding and protected time, guidance for alignment of related initiatives, and support for evaluation, including identifying meaningful measures of fidelity and school climate and student outcomes.

District participants also identified some ways to build efficiency through cross-district, regional, and state partnerships; consideration of those connections and building state-wide or within state infrastructure could be both fiscally efficient and support gaps in district's current capacity. District leaders may consider how to leverage relationships with university partners to support these training goals but also measurement and evaluation goals.

Notably, research also maintains that appropriate policies on multiple administrative levels are needed to support the school culture shift necessary to improve individual outcomes (Fagan et al., 2019), which was highlighted in participant responses discussing district capacity (e.g., dedicated district roles and training of district personnel).

There was consistent emphasis in the need both for clear policy and practice guidelines; there was recognition that policy could enhance buy-in and that clarity in core components of RP would help support implementation.

Emerging literature has also examined how implementation strategies can boost implementation by improving drivers or off-setting barriers to implementation. Identified

implementation strategies can address buy-in, readiness, and alignment (Cook et al., 2019).

While ongoing coaching is known to support implementation within research and by practitioners, research also suggests that first addressing people's mindsets and belief systems that may run counter to an intervention shows promise for improving implementation (e.g., Larson et al., 2021) and may have relevance to RP implementation given these themes. This may be an area for districts to consider.

In fact, some participants alluded to this in discussion about mindset shifts that followed adults engaging in the practices themselves and feeling the impacts of the practices (e.g., in the case of administrator circles and with SROs).

## Conclusion

A growing body of research suggests RP can be impactful in improving school discipline and many states require or encourage their implementation; however, school districts have limited guidance on how to best implement RP.

This study clarifies that investments in external partners, coaches, time and resources, as well as thoughtfully addressing buy-in, and alignment with other district level initiatives are high-leverage tools to change school culture and disciplinary trends.

Clear policies with established learning networks can further support schools in implementing RP to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and improve student outcomes.

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