Restorative Practices Help Reduce Student Suspensions

Schools and school districts across the country are looking for evidence-based strategies to improve their learning and social environments. Restorative practices, developed in the justice system as a way to mediate and repair relationships between offenders and their victims, are offering a way forward. In schools, restorative practices have been adopted to offer a means to respond to conflict and build relationships in an inclusive, nonpunitive way. The practices range from informal actions, such as using "I" (affective) statements to express personal feelings to build community, to formal practices, such as responding to a student's disruptive actions in a "responsive circle." In this circle, students and staff discuss the incident with the offender, being careful to emphasize the harm that was done rather than the person who did it. In this way, the offender is given time to reflect, apologize, make amends if necessary, and reintegrate into the community.

But are restorative practices effective? Researchers from the RAND Corporation conducted one of the first rigorous evaluations of restorative practices as implemented in a city school district. They found that the practices had a positive effect in schools by reducing school suspensions. The study was conducted in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district in Pennsylvania, which serves approximately 25,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade in 54 schools. The research team conducted a randomized controlled trial of restorative practices in 44 of those schools between June 2015 and June 2017. The 44 schools were evenly split between schools that adopted a specific program and control schools that did not. The analyses focused on program implementation, as well as outcomes.

Restorative Practices in the Pittsburgh Public Schools District

In 2014, Pittsburgh Public Schools applied for and received a grant from the National Institute of Justice to adopt restorative practices, seeking support to make the schools safer. A 2013–14 student survey had demonstrated to district leaders that 18 percent of students believed that they must be ready to fight to defend themselves, 35 percent felt angry about the way adults treated them at school, and 22 percent believed that student misbehavior slowed down learning. Additionally, 20 percent of all students and 28 percent of African American

Key findings:

- Restorative practices—inclusive and non-punitive ways to respond to conflict and build community—were successful in reducing student suspensions in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district.

- Restorative practices reduced suspension rates of elementary grade students, African American students, students from low-income families, and female students more than for students not in these groups.

- Restorative practices did not improve academic outcomes, nor did they reduce suspensions for middle school students or suspensions for violent offenses.

- Other school districts can learn important lessons on training, practice, support, and data collection from Pittsburgh when adopting a restorative practices program.

males were suspended during the 2013–14 school year. The district considered these suspension rates problematic for three reasons: (1) They supported the notion that Pittsburgh Public Schools were not safe places, (2) disparities in suspension rates raised questions about equity for African American students, and (3) suspended students were put at risk of low school achievement, dropping out, and other negative effects, as cited in studies on exclusionary disciplinary practices.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools district chose to implement the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program, designed by the International Institute for Restorative Practices. The two-year program has 11 elements and includes on-site professional development, staff professional learning groups, and ongoing coaching. The elements are presented in the table.

Findings

The research team gathered and assessed quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to implementation and program outcomes. Outcomes were considered at three levels: (1) student: suspensions, arrests, attendance, mobility, and achievement; (2) teacher: student ratings; and (3) school: teacher

The 11 Elements of the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change Program

Element	Definition
Affective statements	Personal expressions of feeling in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others
Restorative questions	Questions selected or adapted from two sets of standard questions designed to challenge the negative behavior of the wrongdoer and to engage those who were harmed
Small impromptu conferences	Questioning exercises that quickly resolve lower-level incidents involving two or more people
Proactive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors
Responsive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that engage students in the management of conflict and tension by repairing harm and restoring relationships in response to a moderately serious incident or pattern of behavior affecting a group of students or an entire class
Restorative conferences	Meetings in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of less serious incidents where all of those involved in an incident (often including friends and family of all parties) come together with a trained facilitator who was not involved in the incident and who uses a structured protocol
Fair process	A set of transparent practices designed to create open lines of communication, assure people that their feelings and ideas have been taken into account, and foster a healthy community as a means of treating people respectfully throughout a decisionmaking process so that they perceive that process to be fair, regardless of the outcome
Reintegrative management of shame	The process of listening actively to what a shamed person has to say, acknowledging the feelings of the shamed person, and encouraging the shamed person to express their feelings and to talk about the experience that brought about the shame response
Restorative staff community	A community that models and consistently uses restorative practices to build and maintain healthy staff relationships
Restorative approach with families	The consistent use of restorative practices in interactions with students' family members
Fundamental hypothesis understandings	Understanding the fundamental hypothesis that human beings are happiest, healthiest, and most likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in authority do things *with* them rather than *to* them or *for* them

ratings of teaching and learning conditions. While the findings are primarily positive, it should be noted that they represent only two years of implementation of a specific program and that researchers did not have access to information on behavior interventions in the control schools during the course of the study.

Strategies to build program capacity were successful. Staff in the schools using restorative practices were trained and supported throughout the two years of the study. The International Institute for Restorative Practices provided four days of professional development. All staff were asked to attend two of these days, and the other two were voluntary. Throughout the two years, books, videos, posters, and other supporting material were distributed in the schools, and all principals worked with a professional restorative practices coach. Principals were asked to establish restorative leadership teams, and the coaches were asked to schedule monthly calls with these teams to monitor progress and address challenges. The coaches also visited each of their assigned schools at least twice during each school year. School staff were asked to participate in monthly professional learning groups. The Pittsburgh Public Schools restorative practices project manager provided additional support to the selected schools, including supplementary materials and individualized coaching.

These strategies paid off. Staff reported using affective statements, proactive circles, impromptu conferences, and responsive circles often. Specifically, 49 percent of staff reported using affective statements often or always, 69 percent reported using proactive circles often or always, and 44 percent reported using impromptu conferences or responsive circles often or always over the course of two years. High school staff reported significantly less use of restorative practices than did elementary school staff. It could be that taking time out of a lesson for a circle or restorative response is a proportionally greater cost for teachers who see students one period in the day than for teachers who see those students for more of the day.

Teachers observed that restorative practices improved school climate. Teachers' responses to a district survey indicated that those in the restorative practice schools thought that conduct management, teacher leadership, school leadership, and teaching and learning conditions had improved. The perceived impact of restorative practices on conduct management was especially significant. Teachers in these schools reported that they now worked in a safer environment and that they understood student conduct policies better.

Average suspension rates and disparities in suspension rates were reduced in the restorative practice schools. This finding is driven by a large impact on suspensions in

elementary grades. Suspension rates have gone down in Pittsburgh Public Schools overall in the past few years, but data showed that the new program further reduced both the number of days students were suspended and the number of suspensions. Not only were students less likely to be suspended, but they were less likely to be suspended multiple times. In the schools that did not implement restorative practices, days lost to suspension in the district declined by 18 percent from the 2014–15 school year to the 2016–17 school year, but in the schools that did implement restorative practices, suspension rates declined by 36 percent. Moreover, students in restorative practices schools experienced more school days, not only because they were less likely to be suspended but also because they were also less likely to be transferred to an alternative school. Suspension rates of African American students, of students from low-income families, and of female students also went down in the treatment schools relative to the control group.

Restorative practices did not positively affect all students in the treatment schools. Despite fewer suspensions, academic outcomes did not improve in the treatment schools. At the middle grade level (grades 6–8), academic outcomes actually worsened in the treatment schools, and suspension rates in those grades did not change. It could be that it is more challenging for restorative practices to positively affect middle grade students, at least within a two-year time frame. Additionally, the study showed that there was no change in the rate of suspensions for male students or students with individual education plans, and there was no reduction in the number of incidents of violence or arrests. This study did not demonstrate that restorative practices can be effective in curbing the most violent behavior, at least within a two-year implementation period.

Recommendations for School Districts

This study suggests that restorative practices are promising, particularly for elementary schools seeking to reduce suspension rates. The study elicited a number of recommendations for other districts considering a program similar to SaferSanerSchools™:

- **Ensure that school leaders understand and can model restorative practices.** The study showed that school staff who received modeling and/or feedback from school leaders were more likely to use restorative practices.
- **Provide mandatory professional development.** The mandatory training sessions provided both a basic overview of restorative practices and practical information on how to run circles, which is an essential element of the practice. These sessions were well attended and highly rated by participants.
- **Provide books and other materials on restorative practices.** Staff acknowledged receiving and valuing the materials that were provided to them in the two-year study period.
- **Provide frequent coaching by an experienced coach.** The initial plan for Pittsburgh Public Schools included two visits each year to each treatment school by a restorative practices coach. However, the principals in the treatment schools requested more-frequent visits and were allowed more in the second year. The ideal number of coaching visits is unknown, but it is likely that two per year is insufficient. In interviews, many staff noted the importance of having an external, highly practiced coach provide objective feedback and experience-based modeling.
- **Establish a professional learning community on restorative practices.** School staff who participated in these monthly meetings were more likely to understand and use restorative practices.
- **Weave restorative practices throughout the whole day.** All teachers face time constraints, and taking time out to build community can be difficult to fit into a busy day. Although most teachers did adopt at least some restorative practices, they reported "lack of time" as the biggest barrier to doing so. Teachers can adopt quick daily practices to save time, including welcoming each student by name when they enter the classroom, using affective statements while they are teaching, and forming classroom circles to simultaneously build community and convey core academic content.
- **Ensure that district leaders can manage this program.** A restorative practices project manager at the district level coordinated multiple aspects of the program in Pittsburgh, including training and coach visits. The project manager also provided supplementary materials and coaching. Without this level of support and oversight, it is unlikely that as many schools could have implemented the program successfully.
- **Implement data collection systems to collect accurate information on the behavioral incidents the district is trying to impact.** In particular, teachers and other staff should have a system in which they can record incidents, both minor and major, and responses, such as referrals to the principal, detentions, and in-school suspensions. Only then will the community be certain that restorative practices are having the desired impact.

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