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Restorative Practices in Schools: Research Reveals Power of Restorative Approach, Part I

BY ABBEY J. PORTER

Educators around the globe are using restorative practices to proactively prevent problems like bullying and violence. Research shows that restorative approaches can transform student behavior and build healthy school communities. Part I of this two-part article looks at what educators and trainers say about the benefits and strategies of implementing restorative methods. Part II will provide quantitative analyses illustrating the impact of restorative practices in schools.

Growing awareness that punishments such as detention and suspension only aggravate issues such as bullying, violence, poor academic performance and parental apathy has prompted educators to explore restorative practices to create safe, supportive learning environments.

Restorative practices promotes inclusiveness, relationship-building and problem-solving, through such restorative methods as circles for teaching and conflict resolution to conferences that bring victims, offenders and their supporters together to address wrongdoing. Instead of punishment, students are encouraged to reflect on and take responsibility for their actions and come up with plans to repair harm.

Case studies and evaluations conducted in schools worldwide indicate that restorative practices improve relationships among students and teachers, reduce disciplinary problems and build community. The most significant qualitative finding to date, said Dr. Paul McCold, researcher and founding faculty member of the International Institute for Restorative Practices graduate school, is that restorative practices transform schools'

academic and social culture. "We know that the sense of belonging and pride in school are related to academic performance and dropout rates, and dropout rates are related to involvement in the criminal justice system and more at-risk behavior. The more involvement in school and positive peer groups, the less likely students are to engage in risky behavior."



Hal Gould, South Lyon Herald

Debbie Little, restorative practices coordinator, South Lyon, Michigan, Community Schools, conducts a circle at Centennial Middle School.

Changing from a punitive to a restorative mindset represents a paradigm shift that McCold and others believe is critical. "It's widely recognized among school leaders that conventional discipline is ineffective," said Bill Sower, a Michigan, USA, schools trainer and former IIRP regional coordinator. "Out-of-school suspension rewards misbehavior for students who don't want to be in school. In-school suspension promotes the growth of negative subcultures ... which disrupt the whole school climate. Restorative practices is a credible alternative."

Marg Armstrong, an educational consultant and restorative practices trainer in Melbourne, Australia, is equally

convinced. A former project officer with the Australian Department of Education who coordinated training in hundreds of schools, she received a Churchill Fellowship in 2004 to study restorative practices in schools in the US, the UK, Canada and New Zealand. She has seen restorative methods reduce suspensions and detentions, increase safety and harmony and lessen stress for teachers.

Lynn Zammit, of the Waterloo Region District School Board in Ontario, Canada, believes restorative interventions interrupt the cycle of violence she has witnessed in bullying. Zammit, who coordinates the district's Choices for Youth program for expelled students, finds that offenders often start out as victims. "Many kids we see in the expulsion program have been the victims of bullying for years," she said. "They have been attacked and persecuted and isolated ... until one day they make up their minds they can't take it anymore and they bring a weapon to school." Zammit wanted to reach such victims early and provide them with effective strategies.

Two years ago, the Waterloo school board received a grant from the victims' services unit of the Attorney General's Office to train educators in restorative conferencing as an alternative to suspension and expulsion, as a re-entry strategy for suspended students, and for classroom management. A year later, schools reported using circles in place of suspending 115 students and expelling eight. Zammit hopes the program will be implemented on a provincial level.

In addition to conflict resolution, restorative practices offer a compass for

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day-to-day interaction. "Everything to do with restorative justice is based on relationships and the need, when things go wrong, to mend relationships — and before things go wrong to stress relationships so incidents don't occur," said Zammit. She refers to "CCR — community, capacity, and relationships."

"Restorative practices are about really focusing on that sense of community, and about young people's capacity to do things differently. It's about focusing on capacities rather than deficits. When things go wrong, we hold circles and we talk and we generate solutions. It's just the way we do business here."

Zammit emphasized that circles build valuable abilities in students. "Social-emotional skills are just like any other skills; they need to be developed and modeled," she said. "Restorative practices are a means to develop empathy and kindness and caring and good communication skills." She noted that researchers such as Daniel Goleman have found that teaching social-emotional skills to children can affect long-term factors such as relationships and employment. Educators should look closely at "what trajectory we put kids on when we use punishment," she suggested.

Restorative practices have proved effective for schools with a variety of demographics and disciplinary problems. Bill Sower, who has trained both inner-city and suburban schools, said the implementation remains essentially the same.

In addition to improving student behavior and relationships, said Sower, restorative methods improve relationships among teachers. Salem Elementary School, in South Lyon, Michigan, suffered from widespread discipline problems and lacked a sense of community.

"The teachers were very demoralized," said Sower, who used circles in a one-day training two years ago. "In the circles, teachers could express their true feelings

about school culture and the distress it caused them [including] feelings of rejection or a lack of collegiality. It was a very emotional day. The staff decided to use this model in all their classes with all their students, every day."

The school implemented circles, along with occasional full conferences for serious issues. Within a few months, teachers were reporting fewer disciplinary issues. Disciplinary referrals eventually dropped 75 percent. A 73 percent drop in disciplinary referrals at South Lyon's Centennial Middle School is also credited to restorative practices. Said Sower, "There has been a dramatic transformation in these schools regarding the level of trust and cooperation among students, between students and adults and among adults themselves. When teachers share ideas and help each other it affects the quality of instruction." Restorative practices have also had a highly positive effect in Lansing, Michigan, schools (to be featured in Part II).

Nancy Riestenberg, a violence prevention specialist with the Minnesota Department of Education, USA, noted that each school is different and that restorative methods take time to implement. "You're talking about something that for a lot of people is a personal attitude and a cultural change. There's a learning curve for adults as well as children."

A recent New Zealand study of five primary and secondary schools, by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University, "Respectful Schools: Restorative Practices in Education," found restorative methods helped build respectful relationships, deal with disciplinary problems and reduce suspensions. Schools must "introduce changes across the whole school...to improve all children's involvement and commitment to schooling." A whole-school approach is defined as commitment by students,

staff, board members, family, community and government.

Time is critical. "Building a restorative community is an evolutionary process which needs everyone to be involved in a consistent application of restorative principles and practice over time," states the New Zealand report, also noting the need for long-term funding to sustain restorative approaches.

The value of whole-school commitment, along with time and resources, also emerged in a study of three primary schools in Adelaide, South Australia, conducted by the Department of Education and Children's Services. Looking at teacher and student classroom behavior in schools that implemented restorative practices in varying degrees, the study identified "clear relationships between the priority afforded to ... implementation at whole of school level and the degree of change at classroom level." Teachers at the "most restorative" school reported that students displayed less emotional volatility when dealing with issues, a stronger sense of belonging and cohesiveness, improved self-esteem and increased willingness to participate. Students in all the schools improved in communication skills, responsibility and relationships.

The experiences documented by restorative practices trainers, educators and researchers suggest that, while restorative practices require time and dedication to implement, they pay off in an environment that supports positive behavior and relationships — and learning. Said Marg Armstrong, "If kids don't feel better about being in school, we're wasting our time. If they feel more connected to one another at school, they're going to want to be there, and if they want to be there, they're going to want to learn." ☉