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

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As an increasing number of schools worldwide adopt restorative practices as a means of dealing with discipline and improving school culture, school leaders are beginning to analyze the impact of restorative methods. The numbers tell a powerful story: Schools implementing restorative methods have seen a drop in disciplinary problems, decreased reliance on detention and suspension, and an improvement in student attitudes. Gathering such data is important, both for evaluating the effectiveness of restorative methods and garnering funding support for restorative programs.

(Instead of zero tolerance and authoritarian punishment, restorative practices provides high levels of both control and support to encourage appropriate behavior, and places responsibility on students themselves, using a collaborative response to wrongdoing. The philosophy underlying these practices holds that human beings are happier, more productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things WITH them, rather than TO them or FOR them.)

So far, much significant research on restorative practices in schools has consisted of qualitative studies. (See Part I of this article: <http://www.safersan-erschools.org/library/schoolresearch1.html>.) "We've shown in case study after case study that schools that adopt this approach report significant changes in their cultures," said Dr. Paul McCold, researcher and founding faculty member of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) graduate school. "What's needed now is solid quantitative

research." Both quantitative and qualitative analyses are valuable, he noted, as qualitative studies can help to explain quantitative findings.

Quantitative research is vital to demonstrating the impact of restorative practices, said McCold. "Otherwise, you're just following some philosophy. The only way to know that a program is effective is to evaluate it. A huge amount of money is wasted on programs that are not effective."

McCold demonstrated that restorative practices are effective even for at-risk youth by evaluating the alternative school/day treatment programs run by Community Service Foundation and Buxmont Academy, demonstration programs of the IIRP. CSF Buxmont uses restorative practices to help at-risk youth achieve positive changes in behavior and attitude. Studies conducted from 1999 to 2003 found significant positive results: Students in the programs developed higher self-esteem and showed an increase in prosocial values, becoming more willing to take responsibility for their misbehavior. Court records showed a two-thirds reduction in offending rates after six months in the program, as well as two years after discharge. (See <http://www.realjustice.org/library/erm.html>.)

Studies involving baseline measures and comparison groups can best pinpoint the effects of implementing restorative practices in schools, McCold noted. While such studies are few now, several educational and governmental groups have undertaken evaluations that demonstrate the effects of implementing restorative approaches.

In Michigan, USA's, urban Lansing School District, a pilot project begun in Pattengill Middle School in January 2005 introduced restorative practices to manage disciplinary issues. At Pattengill, restorative practices:

- Supported a 15 percent drop in suspensions, while suspension rates at the district's other middle schools increased.
- Averted two expulsions.
- Resolved conflicts effectively. Ninety-three percent of 292 students participating reported using restorative methods to resolve their conflicts.
- Taught students new skills. Nearly 90 percent of participating students reported learning new skills in their restorative experiences, and 86 percent reported using those skills to peacefully resolve or avert conflicts after their restorative interventions.

The program's success led the district to expand its restorative program to one elementary school, two more middle schools and a high school for 2006–2007. Lansing restorative justice coordinator Nancy Schertzing estimated that through mid-April 2007, restorative interventions had saved Lansing students nearly 1,500 days of suspension.

Minnesota, USA, public schools are implementing a range of restorative practices. (See <http://www.iirp.org/library/riestenberg.html>.) From 1998 through 2001, the Minnesota Department of Education conducted an evaluation of restorative practices in primary and secondary schools in four districts. The study showed a 30 to 50 percent reduction in suspensions. One elementary

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school reduced its behavior referrals for inappropriate physical contact from seven per day to a little more than one per day.

Palisades High School, in Pennsylvania, USA, was the first IIRP SaferSanerSchools pilot school. Data gathered by the school showed a dramatic decrease in detentions, suspensions, disciplinary referrals and incidents of disruptive behavior from 1998–1999, when the school introduced restorative practices, to 2001–2002. Overall disciplinary referrals decreased from 1,752 to 1,154; suspensions decreased from 105 to 65; detentions dropped from 844 to 332; and incidents of disruptive behavior decreased from 273 to 153.

Restorative practices arrived at Palisades Middle School in fall 2000 via classroom circles and restorative discipline processes. Over the next year, disciplinary referrals fell from 913 to 516, and incidents of fighting dropped from 23 to 16.

Springfield Township High School, just outside Philadelphia, USA, began implementing restorative practices in January 2000. After beginning with a small group of teachers, the entire faculty was introduced to the approach in fall 2001. Over the next year, incidents of disrespect to teachers fell from 71 to 21, and incidents of classroom disruption fell from 90 to 26. (See <http://www.safersanerschools.org/library/ssspilots.html>.)

Prior to undergoing training in restorative practices in January 2003, teachers and administrators at Queanbeyan South Public School, in New South Wales, Australia, struggled with bullying, violence and truancy among pupils. Problems were particularly prevalent among the school's Aboriginal children, many of whom came from homes that lacked support for education.

After implementation of a restorative approach, the school's detention and suspension rates and incidence of aggression against teachers dropped. The percentage

of teachers reporting that they had been the subject of intimidating or threatening behavior dropped from 56 percent in 2002 to 24 percent in 2004. Teachers reporting that they had been verbally assaulted decreased from 74 percent to 61 percent, and those reporting that they had been physically assaulted plummeted from 53 percent to just 3 percent. Results were particularly striking among Aboriginal students, none of whom was suspended in 2004. These positive data have been replicated since. Queanbeyan South relief principal Rosalind Drover reported that because of their success transforming their school culture with restorative practices, theirs was one of only two government schools invited to the National Safe Schools Conference. (See <http://www.safersanerschools.org/library/queanbeyan.html>.)

The Waterloo Region District School Board, in Ontario, Canada, implemented restorative conferencing in 2005 to manage violence, particularly bullying. The district's elementary suspensions dropped 80 percent in under three years; its secondary school suspensions decreased by 65 percent; and secondary and elementary expulsions dropped by a third. Lynn Zammit, who coordinates the district's Choices for Youth program for expelled students, said that restorative practices represents a "big part" of the district's dramatic results.

Between 2001 and 2004, the Youth Justice Board of England and Wales evaluated restorative programs in six primary schools and 20 secondary schools in what board member and education consultant Graham Robb considers one of the most "robustly evaluated" restorative practices projects. The schools were part of nine Youth Offending Teams, or YOTs, encompassing representatives of probation, social service, health and police.

Troubled by problems such as theft and bullying, the schools implemented a

range of restorative practices, from active listening and peer mediation to restorative conferences. The study evaluated factors including participant satisfaction and the processes' impact on victimization. Secondary schools were compared to similar, "non-program" schools where restorative practices had not been implemented. (Non-program primary schools were not available for comparison.)

Surveys were conducted in the schools at the beginning and end of the implementation period. Greater improvements were evident in the three districts that had implemented restorative practices over a three-year period. Schools in the other seven districts had had only 18 months to institute restorative methods. Among the statistically significant findings in schools where restorative practices had been implemented for three years:

- 23 percent fewer students thought that bullying was a serious problem at their school, compared to a 3-percent reduction at the non-program schools.
- 10 percent more students thought their school was doing a good job at stopping bullying; at non-program schools, 1 percent fewer students felt their school was doing a good job stopping bullying.
- The percentage of students reporting that they had never been called a racist name increased by 11 percent, compared to a 3-percent increase at non-program schools.

Staff surveys indicated a "significant improvement in pupil behaviour in the programme schools, while behaviour had declined in the non-programme schools." Staff reporting improvement in student behavior between the first survey and the follow-up survey increased by 6 percent in the program schools, compared to a decrease of 5 percent at non-program-schools. Program school staff who reported a worsening in student behavior decreased by 9 percent, while

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such reporting by non-program-school staff increased by 12 percent.

The vast majority of restorative conferences at these schools (92 percent) resulted in successful agreements between the parties involved, and student participants reported a high degree of satisfaction (89 percent) with the conferences. Ninety-three percent said the process was fair and that justice has been done. Only 4 percent of agreements had been broken as of a three-month follow-up. Results were strongest for schools that implemented restorative practices using a whole-school approach.

Among the YOTs studied by the Youth Justice Board is the Sefton Centre for Restorative Practice. It began in 2004 to implement restorative practices across the board in the borough of Sefton, including 35 of 110 primary and secondary schools, with training conducted through Real Justice UK and the IIRP's SaferSanerSchools program. In addition to training staff, children were taught to be peer mediators and to help each other sort through problems.

In 20 schools in Sefton's most deprived areas, the center partnered with the Behaviour Improvement Programme (BIP) of the Department for Education and Skills of England and Wales, which found that restorative practices fit well with its introduction of solution-based therapy and improved emotional literacy in the schools. In those 20 schools, permanent exclusions were reduced by 70 percent between 2003 and 2006. Recidivism was reduced as well. Of 59 conferences run in one term, the school experienced no recidivism for misbehavior ranging from bullying and assaults to swearing at teachers. (See <http://www.realjustice.org/library/sefton.html>.)

The Bessels Leigh School, in Oxfordshire, England, a residential school for boys 11 to 16 with emotional and behavior difficulties, introduced restorative prac-

tices in 2004 after finding conventional punishments such as detention ineffective in dealing with its increasingly challenging clientele. The "turning point" for the school, says principal John Boulton, came in 2005 after it underwent circle training—a process that helped to create a sense of community and reduce vandalism in the school.

Comparing the three-week period in September 2004 that preceded the training to the three-week period immediately following, school officials found that negative incidents at the school dropped from 362 to 164. Negative physical incidents dropped from 13 to 9, and incidents of damage decreased from 10 to 3. (See <http://www.realjustice.org/library/besselsleigh.html>.)

The Scottish Pilot Projects on Restorative Practices/Approaches, begun in 2004 by the Scottish government, provided funding for a 30-month pilot project (extended by two years), bringing restorative practices to 18 schools—10 high schools, seven elementary schools and one special school, in urban, suburban and rural areas. ("Restorative Practices/Approaches" refers to "restoring good relationships when there has been conflict or harm and developing school ethos, policies and procedures that reduce the possibilities of such conflict and harm.") A concurrent evaluation by the universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow collected qualitative data in the schools through formal and informal interviews, focus groups, and classroom and meeting observation, and employed quantitative data-collection methods such as staff and pupil surveys. Hard data, such as numbers of pupils expelled, were also collected.

Although this data is not yet ready for release, Gwynedd Lloyd, head of educational studies at University of Edinburgh, reported that the data were largely very positive, in terms of both the impact

on observable behavior and the way restorative approaches have been received by staff and students. Lloyd noted that a whole-school restorative approach was more successful than a focus just on conferencing in response to behavioral offenses. Also, implementation was more successful when all school staff were trained in restorative approaches, as opposed to only those staff who are specifically charged with handling behavioral issues. Implementation tended to be more difficult to achieve in secondary schools than in elementary schools, possibly because secondary school teachers tend to feel the need to focus on their particular lesson or subject, rather than on educating the whole child. (See: http://www.safersanerschools.org/library/beth06_lloyd.html.)

School leaders who have studied the impact of restorative practices in their institutions identify a practical purpose for collecting data: It can help secure funding. The Lansing School District's restorative justice project, a collaborative effort with the Dispute Resolution Center of Central Michigan and the Tri-County Balanced and Restorative Justice Alliance, has secured multi-year funding from the Capital Area United Way and support from the Capital Region Community Foundation.

"We wouldn't have any grantors if we didn't have statistics showing we're actually making a difference," said Nancy Schertzing. "You have to compete out there for a limited pool of funds. The data is very powerful, and it makes people take us much more seriously. It gets people's attention in a way that stories don't."

The majority of research on restorative practices in schools to date has yielded highly positive results. The IIRP hopes that these encouraging results will help foster the growth of restorative practices in schools and other settings worldwide. ☉