



## RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN BRIEF

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Restorative Practices, done right, means that students, teachers, parents and the wider community want to be in the school, contributing constructively to the whole school community. Restorative Practices builds a school culture that is affirming. The climate becomes healthy. Suspension and expulsions decline, attendance increases. Classroom management diminishes as an issue. There is less teacher turnover. Office referrals are not necessary. The school to prison pipeline is disrupted. Staff and students are happier. There is a growing feeling of well-being.

In contrast, an unhealthy school culture breeds classroom management issues that inhibit teaching and learning; overreliance on suspensions, expulsions and other exclusionary discipline practices with a disproportionate impact on Black, Brown and other people of color, low-income children, language minorities, and children with disabilities; a sense of a learning community gone awry. Sometimes these challenges escalate to serious school safety and security concerns such as physical harm, mental suffering and bullying; and at times, school shootings; other times they simply become a corrosive fabric in the school. Too many of these students end up in juvenile and adult jails and prisons.

Restorative Practices is not a touchy-feely philosophy that is soft on discipline. In fact, it is an emerging science within the social sciences field taught across institutions in the U.S. and abroad, that reinforces the need for developing life-long skills needed for students to be productive citizens, workers and family members in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In K-12 public education, it is a whole school strategy designed to establish a sense of community which includes every person related to the school. This includes community stakeholders that provide wraparound services that benefit young people. It is an effective way of supporting a community care approach that fosters prevention through partnerships with a more connected school community.

We know from years of scholarly research that student outcomes will be better when adults understand the critical factors and conditions that ensure that effective restorative practices are successfully carried out and sustained, from the district to the school to the classroom, and from the school and classroom to the community.

Restorative Practices motivates a community of leaders and learners to encourage the expression of thoughts and feelings authentically and courageously. This supports restorative dialogue, the types of questions used to address harm and conflict constructively, and the types of circles that are convened to transform classroom behaviors and create a positive school climate and culture.

The core component of Restorative Practices is The Circle. The Circle can involve three people; it can involve all students and staff in a school; it can be made up of all the teachers; it can address relationship conflicts between teacher and parent. The Circle is a circle because it encourages every participant to be equally involved. Each person's voice matters. Its primary purpose is to connect people and what they are thinking with a result that helps identify problems and solutions. Each person's voice and perspective is heard, understood and respected.

Sometimes the Circle is designed around a specific incident of conflict. At that time the conversation revolves around the following three questions:

1. What happened?
2. Who was affected and how?
3. What do you need to address the harm and move on?

But the Circle is also used routinely in other settings. It becomes a way of life. It is the sustainable school culture. For example, instruction related to thinking, problem solving and analysis can be facilitated powerfully in the context of a Circle. The best Restorative Schools often open faculty meetings with a Circle question. The Circle will be used several times a week in homeroom settings. The Circle is an effective tool to build community, engagement, and positive relationships through valuing others.

Restorative Practices becomes a powerful tool in creating a culturally inclusive school. Students bring who they are and everything they experience outside of the school inside the school. The greater the appreciation of the student as a person and their experience by school staff the stronger the connections will be with the students.

The principal's leadership, personal participation and modeling are pivotal. Initial training of all school staff as well as annual refresher training is necessary. But neither initial training nor the annual refresher is sufficient. Continuous coaching is also significant. It is also important to provide Restorative Practices training and engagement for students, parents and community.

Sound implementation of restorative practices will depend on district and school administrators embracing policies, practices and allocating resources that promote a healthy school culture. Therefore, Restorative Practices must be written into strategic planning documents, implemented within all school-based systems, driven and supported by school leaders, and reinforced by everyone that make up the culture of the school.

Restorative Practices is the responsibility of literally everyone in the school. It is a whole school model. A successful Restorative School will have a Restorative Leadership Team. It will require significant involvement of the staff and students in its planning and implementation. Restorative Practices is not a quick fix. It requires sustained commitment that starts at the top but buy-in from all through understanding and engagement is essential. A successful Restorative School will be data driven and apply restorative problem-solving circles to increase the probability and predictability that students will

succeed. The school will be a Learning Community focused on the whole child, not simply teachers in individual classrooms with books delivering content.

One critical component in introducing Restorative Practices in a school is for staff to buy-in and understand that Restorative Practices is not simply “one more thing to do”. We must demonstrate that Restorative Practices makes everything the staff does easier and more effective. For example, a common outcome of an effective Restorative school/classroom is a big reduction in disruptive behavior. Classroom management becomes a backburner issue, rather than the biggest challenge many teachers face.

As wise people have observed over the years, “some people see things as they are and say why? Others see things that could be and say why not? Restorative Practices is a direct example of the latter. It is a strategy based in hope. It solves problems. It understands the past, recognizes the challenges of the present, but embraces a future characterized by equity, civility and solved problems.