

A Better Approach
to
School
Discipline

How restorative practices can help decrease disciplinary referrals and increase students' social-emotional skills

By *Bobby Riley*

One-third of all children report experiencing some level of trauma by the time they are 16 years of age. Students who experience trauma—defined by The National Institute of Mental Health as an event that is emotionally painful or distressful and often results in lasting mental and physical effects—have difficulty establishing relationships, paying attention, regulating emotions, and controlling behavior.

Quite often, students who have behavioral issues are removed from class. Sometimes this removal is necessary for the safety of the classroom community. But students who present with social-emotional deficiencies need connectedness and belonging, not exclusion.

Consider this example: A child becomes angry in class, lashes out verbally, and throws a chair that hits another student. A typical response would be to suspend this student. When the student returns to school, there might be a re-entry conference with the parents and the child to review expected behaviors and consequences for continued issues.

But no steps are usually taken to help the child develop emotional regulation skills. And there's usually no opportunity for the student to repair the damage the disruption may have caused.

As school leaders, we need to let teachers know that supporting students' emotional growth is a priority on par with academic learning.

Restorative practices utilize a problem-solving approach to school discipline issues. Rather than being reactive, it's a proactive approach that builds community around common infractions through community discussions and exploration. These efforts connect students to their classroom community, resulting in increased compassion and empathy. As Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet write in *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools*, "Restorative justice promotes values and principles that use inclusive, collaborative approaches for being in community. These approaches validate the experiences and needs of everyone within the community, particularly those who have been marginalized, oppressed, or harmed ... [and] allow us to act and respond in ways that are healing rather than alienating or coercive."

The Role of Circles in Restorative Practice

A main component of restorative practices is the process of circles. A circle gathering creates a safe space for students to connect, develop relationships, understand others, solve problems, and meet community needs.

At the elementary level, circles start with very basic ideas and concepts. In fact, your first one might simply explore a statement or quote

about color. Begin by having everyone take three deep breaths; this practice centers the group and creates calm. Ask each circle participant, in turn, to share their favorite color; use a talking piece—a physical object passed from person to person that gives its holder the right to talk—to facilitate listening and eliminate interruptions. After everyone has shared, read the quote again, and have everyone take three more breaths to close the circle.

As students and educators develop familiarity with the circle process, discussion questions can become progressively more personal: *What makes you happy? What is something you struggle with?* Teachers can also use circles to gauge student understanding and discuss complex community problems or current events.

Show Your Support for Restorative Practices

As school leaders, we need to let teachers know that supporting students' emotional growth is a priority on par with academic learning.

One way we can do this is by demonstrating empathy and compassion. I often use restorative circles to promote connection, active listening, and leadership among the staff during staff retreats, professional development, and staff meetings. Implementing these components into staff gatherings builds staff capability; just like our students, some staff need support to hone their social-emotional skills.

Share anecdotes and data with your school community to highlight the benefits of restorative practices. A journal is a great way to track student reaction and engagement, and to demonstrate growth over time. You can also track office referrals, student suspensions, and other disciplinary techniques to help you gauge the impact of restorative practices. Since our school instituted restorative practices, we've significantly reduced our suspension rate; last year, we suspended only three students.

Restorative Practices Integrate With Existing Programs

Many schools are already incorporating components, or entire programs, of social-emotional learning curricula. Restorative practices enhance these programs.


The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework is commonly used to label and teach appropriate behaviors. Restorative practices can help students share their ideas around expected behaviors and communal norms. A classroom could

easily discuss classroom expectations using circle prompts such as, *How do we show respect? What do you need to be a successful learner during Reader's Workshop?* or *What interrupts your concentration or learning?* Addressing these prompts in a circle allows students to share thoughts on how a classroom community can support learning at a deeply personal level.

Restorative practices also work with Second Step, a popular, commercial social-emotional learning program, and Responsive Classroom, an evidence-based approach to teaching that focuses on the link between academics and social-emotional learning. Morning Meetings, for instance, are an important component of Responsive Classrooms in which students typically gather to review the day and play a game. A restorative practices circle discussion can easily be added to this practice.

There are many instances of social disconnect, hate, disrespect, and lack of compassion

If students leave our school walls with the capacity to self-advocate, regulate emotions, and exercise empathy, they will be able to learn anything.

in our world today. Our schools are not immune to these outside pressures and influences. It behooves us to make social-emotional well-being imperative in our schools and communities. If students leave our school walls with the capacity to self-advocate, regulate emotions, and exercise empathy, they will be available to learn anything and handle all that life throws at them. Restorative practices can provide a solid foundation. 

Bobby Riley is the principal of Integrated Arts Academy in Burlington, Vermont.



RECOMMENDED READING

Circle Forward: Building a Restorative Community, by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis

The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools: Teaching Responsibility; Creating Caring Climates, by Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet

The American Citizenship Award

Recognize Honor Inspire

Now offering certificates and medallions!

For additional information visit peap-aca.org or call 877-897-4784

Exclusively for K-12 students and awarded by principals, teachers, and other school personnel.

naesp National Association of Elementary School Principals