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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:

Introduction to Restorative Practices: An Equitable Approach

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Disclaimer

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Introduction to Restorative Practices: An Equitable Approach



Restorative practices is grounded in inclusion, empathy, and community-mindedness, and provides a strong antidote to the traumas stemming from social issues and traditional, punishment-oriented conflict resolution practices. These approaches can guide students and educators to build healthy relationships and promote the well-being of their school community.

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PART I: WHAT IS THE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES APPROACH?

“Restorative Practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities” (International Institute for Restorative Practices, n.d.).

A Mindset as Well as an Approach

Restorative practices is an approach to build relationships within a community. Its purpose is to prevent conflict and wrongdoing and respond to wrongdoing after it occurs.

Many schools choose to use restorative practices to eliminate or significantly reduce repeated and long-term student suspensions. A restorative practices approach is more than managing misbehavior. It offers a proactive strategy to create a connected, responsible school community where all members feel valued and have the opportunity to thrive.

Building Relationships

When responding to wrongdoing, restorative practices brings together everyone affected by the conflict to discuss what happened, how they were affected, and what they need to do to restore a positive relationship. Restorative practices, whether proactive or reactive, emphasizes every school member’s responsibility to the community. Thus, it is

a profoundly relational practice. A restorative practices approach is more than a collection of protocols and activities; it is a mindset, a belief about building and restoring community.

The driving idea behind restorative practices is that damaging behaviors cause harm and that harm needs to be repaired. A restorative practices approach involves:

1. **Respecting** the opinions and experiences of all individuals involved in or affected by a harmful behavior.
2. **Taking responsibility** for individual actions and how they harm others.
3. **Repairing harm** by accepting obligations to others in the community and working collaboratively to identify and follow through on solutions.
4. **Reintegrating** the person harmed and the person who caused harm into the community using structured and supportive processes to ensure behaviors are not repeated.
5. **Valuing** inclusion, honesty, empathy, responsibility, and accountability, all of which are at the core of the restorative process.

Key Restorative Practices and Processes

There are various restorative practices commonly found in schools. The following list, modified from “Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools” (Advancement Project, 2014), gathers a range of restorative practices, from simple

practices that require little training to implement, to more intensive practices that require specific expertise because of the more sensitive or complex nature of students' disciplinary events.

Informal restorative practices embedded in school culture:

- Circles
- Restorative chats
- Restorative conferences
- Community conferences
- Peer mediation
- Peer juries

Implementation Challenges

Fronius et al. (2019) conducted a comprehensive literature review of some challenges of implementing Restorative Justice (a term often used interchangeably with restorative practices) in schools. These challenges are all applicable to restorative practices:

- Confusion about what qualifies as Restorative Justice.
- Lack of consensus about the best implementation models.
- Staff time and buy-in required.
- Training and resources needed.
- Teachers performing duties outside their typical job description, including conducting circles during instructional time and more time talking one-to-one with students.
- Perception that Restorative Justice is “soft on student offenses.”
- Deep shift to a restorative climate

could take three to five years (Evans & Lester, 2013).

- Resources needed to sustain the initiative for three to five years.

Why Alternatives to Suspensions Are Critical

Specific student subgroups are suspended more frequently. According to the U.S. Department of Education's 2014 Civil Rights Data Collection, students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as students without disabilities. Likewise, Black students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than their White peers. The U.S. Government Accounting Office (2018) wrote that the disparities in discipline for students who are Black, are male, or have disabilities occur regardless of the type of the disciplinary action, level of school poverty, or type of public school attended.

High rates of suspensions and expulsions are often the result of zero-tolerance policies, which require school officials to apply specific, consistent, and harsh punishment when students break certain rules, regardless of the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context.

According to U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2014), nationwide, as many as 95% of out-of-school suspensions are for non-violent misbehaviors, such as tardiness, dress

code violations, or using bad language.

Zero-tolerance policies have led to increased numbers of youth being “pushed out” of school (suspended or expelled) with no evidence of positive impact on school safety (Losen, 2014). These approaches do not deal with the root causes of misbehavior or violence, and they compromise learning time, school connectedness, and meaningful opportunities for growth. Zero-tolerance approaches also hurt teacher-student relationships.

Students who are suspended even once in ninth grade are twice as likely to drop out of school, from 16% to 32% (Balfanz, 2013). Higher-suspending schools gain no improvement in school achievement, boast higher dropout rates, and increase the likelihood that their students will enter the juvenile justice system (Losen & Martinez, 2013). There is a strong relationship between poor education and incarceration. Students who fail to finish high school are 3.5 times more likely to be arrested than high school graduates. Sixty-eight percent of all men in American prisons do not have a high school diploma (Stipek, 2014).

Overall, the evidence shows the following:

- There is no research to support the claim that schools benefit from frequently suspending or expelling their students in response to non-violent and mundane forms of adolescent misbehavior.
- Research shows that frequent

suspension and expulsion are associated with negative outcomes (Losen, 2011).

- There are large disparities by race, gender, and disability status when using these punishments (Losen, 2011).
- There are alternatives to suspensions and expulsions that improve student outcomes.

Two Success Stories

By 2014, California’s Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) implemented Restorative Justice in nearly half of its schools. The effects over time have reduced suspensions, particularly for Black students; closed the discipline gap; and improved academic outcomes (reading levels, dropout rates, graduation rates) when compared to schools that did not implement restorative practices (Jain, Bassey, Brown, & Kalra, 2014).

RAND conducted a two-year study that examined the implementation of restorative practices in the Pittsburgh Public School District under the leadership of the International Institute for Restorative Practices. This study represents one of the first randomized controlled trials of the impacts of restorative practices on suspension rates and classroom and school climate (Augustine et al., 2018). The report found:

- Restorative practices—inclusive and non-punitive ways to respond to conflict and build community—

reduced student suspension in the Pittsburgh Public Schools district.

- Restorative practices significantly reduced suspension rates of elementary grade students, Black students, students from low-income families, and female students, more than those 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 collections from Pittsburgh when adopting a restorative practices program.

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?

The following recommendations were compiled from “Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools” (Advancement Project, 2014) and “Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Implementation and Impacts” (Jain et al., 2014):

1. **Establish a team** of students, parents/guardians, educators, and community members.
2. **Seek input** from a range of community stakeholders.
3. **Allocate funding** for restorative practices at the school and district level.

4. **Dedicate time** within the school day, such as an advisory period, to practice restorative techniques.
5. **Build a greater infrastructure** at the district and school levels.
6. **Invest in training and coaching** for all involved.
 - o **Tier 1** involves training everyone in the school.
 - o **Tier 2** involves training to facilitate conflict circles to repair harm.
 - o **Tier 3** involves training to facilitate circles for youth who have been suspended, incarcerated, or are feeling unwelcome at school.

Leverage capacity by empowering a core team of expert staff/students to train the trainers.

Involve more parents by familiarizing them with restorative practices at the school and encourage their participation and support for the program.

Capitalize on the enormous potential of students to help establish the program.

Connect with other districts and schools that use restorative practices.

PART III: HOW DO YOU GET STARTED WITH RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?

Administrators and teacher leaders who want to learn more about restorative practices and bring them to their schools and districts can turn to MAEC's new publication. This guide helps schools use restorative approaches to build relationships and address conflict.

Part 1 describes restorative practices and includes basic information about the specific practices and key processes. These tools help people take responsibility for their actions and repair harm when possible. They are specifically used to facilitate community building and address infractions and other incidents.

Part 2 provides initial guidance for school leaders to explore and promote restorative practices.

Part 3 helps school leaders manage the school-wide adoption of restorative practices.

Part 4 provides resources and tools to assist with early implementation of restorative practices. There are links included with all the works cited in the reference section.

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Getting Started with Restorative Practices in Schools: A Guide for Administrators and Teacher Leaders is available at: www.maec.org/restorative-practices

RESOURCES

- **Facing History and Ourselves.** “Taking School Online with a Student-centered Approach” provides strategies for teachers to build community in their classrooms. www.facinghistory.org/books-borrowing/taking-school-online-student-centered-approach.

There are also online resources for educators and students to promote their self-care and relationship building, and over 1,000 content-based resources (including lessons, videos, DVDs, PowerPoints, and teaching strategies) that center around student reflection and dialogue.

www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources

- **The International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP)** identifies the need for restorative practices with families, the community, and the workplace. They suggest that fair process will be vital during remote working when communication is less direct and more difficult. School leaders should help staff manage stress and engage with them to get their input and share resources more often. www.iirp.edu/news/during-the-covid-19-crisis-restorative-practices-can-help. IIRP also shares circle questions that teachers can use to encourage their students to

reflect and share their feelings on the pandemic.

www.iirp.edu/news/responsive-circles-for-covid-19

- **The Oakland Unified School District.** This school district has worked with restorative practices for many years and compiled the following resources: www.ousd.org/Page/19405
 - Videos on how to lead a virtual community building circle
 - Circle templates and supports
 - Antiracism resources
 - A slideshow on how Restorative Practices can be used to create and maintain school community virtually. <https://tinyurl.com/yb59u7fj>
- **Living Justice Press** is a nonprofit publisher for restorative justice. Their website includes free webinars, videos, posters, and other materials for sale. www.livingjusticepress.org/
- **The Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (SEL Center).** Resources include briefs, guides, and a webinar to support districts and schools as they support students during the COVID-19 pandemic. One brief shares strategies of trauma-informed distance learning. <https://selcenter.wested.org/wp->

<content/uploads/sites/3/2020/04/COVID-19-Resources-for-CISELSS.pdf>

- **WestEd.** “Community-Care Strategies for Schools During the Coronavirus Crisis” offers guidance for educators, school staff, and school leaders to help ensure that school communities are effective, cohesive, collaborative, healthy, and sustainable while coping with the stresses of social isolation, school closures, and changes to how services are provided. The brief builds on a growing research base about school climate and culture.
www.wested.org/resources/community-care-strategies-for-schools-covid-19/

- **National Institute of Justice.** “Creating and Sustaining Positive School Climate” describes school climate, how it is assessed, outcomes, assessments, and how it can improve.
www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/250209.pdf

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