



National Center for Youth
Opportunity and Justice



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Augmenting Restorative Approaches with Behavioral Health Supports in School

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INTRODUCTION: The competing realities of the 21st century American education landscape have led to a wide spectrum of school discipline responses. Local, state, and federal leaders navigate pathways to student success and school safety amidst strained budgets, increasing understandings of adolescent brain development and behavioral health, and heightened national attention to school violence incidents. The resulting responses range from zero-tolerance policies to evidence-based student support services and programs, each seeking to find the fulcrum upon which they can best achieve and leverage student success.

This work to find and explore effective responses and supports for student behavioral issues is informed by data from a myriad of sources consistently confirming inequities in the usage of zero-tolerance and other punishment-focused responses that lead to suspensions and expulsions. Specifically, studies show that African American and Latino students are suspended at higher rates than White students for the same or lesser infractions.^{1,2,3} Students with disabilities⁴ and English language learners⁵ are also disproportionately suspended. These disproportionalities disadvantage students, their families, and communities, as research shows that even one out-of-school suspension (OOS) significantly increases the likelihood that a student may not graduate and may have contacts with the juvenile justice system.⁶ Additional research has found a correlation between school suspensions and decreased participation in civic activities later in life (such as voting).⁷

2x

Students with disabilities are twice as likely as students without disabilities to receive an out of school suspension.

25%

Of students arrested in schools, 25 percent have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

This research-to-practice brief explores the relatively recent expansion of the use of restorative practices in American schools as an alternative to zero-tolerance and other removal-focused responses to student behavioral issues. It is not an in-depth comparison between restorative and traditional processes. Instead, the brief focuses on the results, thus far, of the approach’s transition into the school realm, the implementation outcomes, and a model for augmenting restorative discipline responses with behavioral health supports.

Restorative Approaches: Context and Background

Restorative approaches have an extensive history in Native American, First Nation, and other Indigenous cultures. The first systems-based use of restorative approaches is credited to New Zealand’s development of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) in the 1970s. FGC meetings created a space and process for nuclear and extended family members to collaborate on decisions about the needs of systems-involved children and youth. In the United States, offshoots of this model initially emerged in the justice field as an alternative to traditional justice system responses to crimes. Scholars Bergseth and Bouffard (2012) explain “The overall goal of these programs is to restore the harm caused by the offense to the particular victim(s) and to the wider community, as well as to eliminate the likelihood of repeated offenses by addressing any underlying issues with the offender that may have precipitated the offense.”⁸

The definition of crime, proceedings to address it, stakeholder participation, and the end goals differ significantly between traditional and restorative approaches. Traditional justice approaches define crime as a violation against the state with punishment as the end result for those found guilty. Proceedings are court and justice-system based with the offender and the system as the sole active participants. In restorative models, crime is defined as harm to the community and/or violation of a relationship, with restoration as the primary goal of the resulting proceedings. These proceedings are based in the community with the victim, offender, and other impacted community members as the major stakeholders in the process.⁸ In the juvenile justice context, common restorative modalities include, and are not limited to, the following:

TABLE 1: RESTORATIVE MODALITIES COMMON IN JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEMS⁹

Victim-Offender Mediation	Community Reparative Boards	Family Group Conferencing	Circle Sentencing
A process through which the victim is able to inform the offender of the harm caused.	Offenders meet with community members to discuss their delinquent behavior(s) and resulting harm.	A broad group of interested parties (e.g., family members, law enforcement, community members) meet to discuss a resolution.	Multi-conversation process through which victims, offenders, and community members discuss and understand the offense and establish a way for the offender to repair the harm to the victim.

Meta-analyses of the impact of restorative practices in juvenile justice have found higher rates of recidivism reduction resulting from these approaches compared with traditional justice system processes. Currently, questions regarding effectiveness are shifting toward an examination of restorative practices' differential effectiveness based on offense type, demographic factors, and community-level factors.⁷ A study in Arizona found decreased recidivism rates for participating girls (as compared with participating boys), youth receiving services in their local communities, and youth accused of their first and second charges (as compared with youth with multiple prior charges).⁹ Also, studies comparing the outcomes of restorative justice practices for violent offenses and property offenses found that the youth charged with violent offenses experienced significantly reduced rates of recidivism when compared to youth charged with property offenses.^{10,11,12}

Restorative Approaches Implementation and Impacts in School-Based Evaluations

The report *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2018*, prepared by the Bureau of Justice Statistics and National Center for Education Statistics and covering the 2015-2016 school year, provides statistics and some analysis on twenty-two school safety indicators, including school conditions, fights, weapons, student perceptions of safety, and criminal incidents. The 2018 report generally points to a long-trending decrease in school crime and serious offenses. However, problems in the American school environment remain, as shown in Table 2, which depicts national indicators of school crime and safety, as reported by school administrators during the 2015-2016 school year.

TABLE 2: NATIONAL INDICATORS OF SCHOOL CRIME AND SAFETY¹³

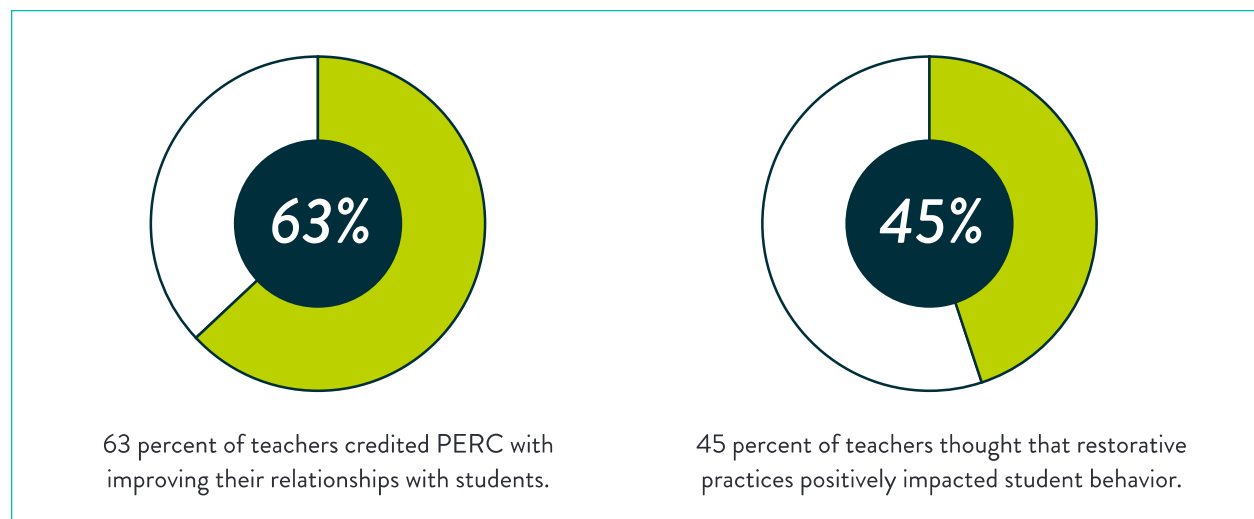
43%	43 percent of public school teachers asserted that student misbehavior disrupted their teaching, and this number rose to 47 percent for teachers with three or fewer years of teaching experience		
37%	37 percent of public schools (approximately 31,000 schools) used, at a minimum, one serious disciplinary action, such as out-of-school suspensions for five days or more, transfer to specialized schools, or removal for the duration of the school year without supplemental education		
44%	44 percent of schools with higher rates of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch used at least one serious disciplinary response as compared with 25 percent of schools with the lowest rates of eligible students		
47%	47 percent of schools contacted police to report one or more incidents, totaling 449,000 crimes associated with the school environment		
infractions prompting the most serious disciplinary actions include:	27% fights (27 percent of schools)	19% distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs (19 percent of schools)	10% possession of a weapon other than a firearm (10 percent of schools)

For educators and administrators trying to keep students who commit infractions in school while building positive school climates and cultures and reducing disciplinary inequities, restorative practices are a logical strategy. However, the speed at which schools are adopting these practices has outpaced the research on their effectiveness in this setting. Assessment of the use of these practices in schools is also complicated by differential restorative practice definitions, models, and implementation approaches.¹⁴ This brief will review two completed randomized controlled trials (in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in Maine) and two rounds of studies in Denver.

PITTSBURGH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

As part of its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ CSSI) funded a two-year study of restorative approaches implementation in the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) system. As part of the study, 22 schools implemented Pittsburgh’s Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities (PERC) program while 22 additional schools served as control schools. The PERC schools integrated the International Institute for Restorative Practices’ (IIRP) SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program which includes graduated restorative practices training for school staff members by role (e.g, instructional, administrative, and disciplinary).¹⁵

The study’s findings regarding the PERC treatment group included a reduction in the use of suspension in participating elementary schools, reduced suspension disparities for African American and economically disadvantaged students, improved teacher ratings of overall school climate, and improved teacher assessments of their relationships with students. Researchers found that PERC resulted in a 16 percent reduction in instruction days lost to suspension. PERC implementation also reduced the instruction-days-lost disparity between African American students and White students from 4.37 days to 3.59 days. At the end of the study’s second year, 63 percent of teachers credited PERC with improving their relationships with students. Forty-five percent of teachers thought that restorative practices positively impacted student behavior. Some teachers noted that that the practices did not seem to impact the behavior of some youth who repeatedly committed serious infractions; these teachers suggested that many of the same students experienced mental health challenges that limited the effectiveness of restorative practices.¹⁵



MAINE

In 2016, researchers concluded a cluster-randomized trial on restorative practices implementation in fourteen middle schools across Maine. The schools partnered with IIRP to implement a whole-school approach. The study found that students whose teachers consistently used restorative practices reported more positive outcomes, including more school connectedness, better school climate, more positive peer relationships, and less victimization from physical and cyber bullying. The study suggests that interventions that create restorative environments increase positive benefits, associations, and developmental opportunities for students and reduce bullying. However, the study's findings were limited by implementation complications, including intervention schools using restorative approaches less frequently than anticipated and control schools using restorative approaches more than expected. The former problems resulted from some teachers under-implementing restorative approaches or not participating at all. Staff turnover and coaching limitations may have also created implementation inconsistencies.¹⁶

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Two studies of the Denver Public Schools' (DPS) restorative approaches implementation used multilevel modeling of school discipline incidents to discern the transition's impact. The rounds of studies cast light on the longer-term impacts of restorative practices implementation. DPS modified its discipline policy in 2008, adding language specifically supporting the use of restorative approaches and clarifying the option for administrators to use restorative approaches in tandem with or in lieu of traditional discipline practices. DPS also began offering voluntary trainings on restorative practices in the form of a four-hour introduction to restorative practices as preventive interventions and a two-day training on disciplinary uses of restorative practices.¹⁷

A review of the district's implementation in 2012-2013 found that students who participated in at least one restorative intervention in the first semester of the year had a 28 percent lower probability of receiving additional office discipline referrals in the second semester. This initial study also found limited restorative practices participation for English language learners and continued disparities in the use of traditional discipline methods for African American students, low-income students, and students in special education.¹⁹

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF SUSPENSION REDUCTIONS IN 2008 AND 2014 BY RACE¹⁸

Student Race	2008 Suspension Rate	2014 Suspension Rate
African American	14%	6%
Native American	11%	5%
Latino	9%	3%
White	5%	1%
Asian	2%	1%

The second DPS study reviewed data from a later school year to determine whether the previously observed outcomes had continued and to study restorative approaches's impact on disparities in out-of-school suspension rates. This second study did find significant decreases in student suspension rates by race. Even with this narrowing, though, African American students remained six times as likely to be suspended as their White classmates. The researchers did not assert a causal factor for the continued disparities and recommended that future studies carefully investigate how school staff determine level of severity of student infractions and how these determinations impact referrals to restorative interventions or exclusionary responses.¹⁸

SUPPORTING STUDENT BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: Restorative Practices and Building a School Responder Model

Researchers have found that between 13 and 20 percent of adolescents have an emotional, mental, or behavioral health condition.¹⁹ For U.S. children and youth between the ages of three and seventeen, national data revealed that in 2016, 1.9 million (3.2 percent) had depression, 4.4 million (7.1 percent) had anxiety, and 4.5 million (7.4 percent) had a behavioral/conduct problem. Conduct problems were more prevalent among boys than girls. Of those children with depression, approximately 75 percent also had anxiety. Data shows that youth from low-income families and African American and Latino children are under-diagnosed and under-treated.²⁰ As mental health conditions impact student achievement and the school environment, the education and policy-making arenas have responded to problematic behaviors, regardless of cause, with tactics from both ends of the school discipline spectrum: exclusionary policies and protocols on the one hand and, on the other, the implementation of validated and evidence-based student supports and services such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS).

The National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice (NCYOJ) develops programs and processes that disrupt school-justice pathways and aid the integration of a public health approach into school discipline and supports. In 2008, NCYOJ started developing a school responder model (SRM) framework through which schools build collaborations with mental health providers and law enforcement stakeholders that enable schools to respond to in-school infractions with a behavioral health response that connects students to school- or community-based service providers. SRMs are designed to complement school policies and practices that ensure student accountability while providing the support that enables students to remain in school and avoid justice-system involvement. To this end, some schools designing and implementing SRMs have also integrated restorative practices as a strategy for addressing and responding to student behaviors.

IMPLEMENTATION STUDY: ReNew Accelerated High School | New Orleans, Louisiana

ReNew Accelerated High School (RAHS) is a non-traditional high school in New Orleans, Louisiana, offering students the opportunity to earn secondary-school credits at an accelerated rate. In 2013, RAHS partnered with the Center for Restorative Approaches (CRA) to implement restorative practices. CRA's restorative approaches specialist was initially embedded in RAHS to facilitate restorative conversations and circles among individuals referred by school staff in response to

student conflicts and fights. This scope of work has evolved into guiding RAHS’s whole-school integration of restorative practices, including staff training and sustainability planning. The CRA specialist describes this shift in roles as follows: “It’s been taken from just one person doing restorative circles and conversations to the whole school thinking of how they can have restorative conversations—so students are not just getting suspended, but [instead] they have an opportunity to figure out what’s going on—and giving students the opportunity to work with teachers and staff to make a plan on how to make things better.”²¹ To support implementation of the whole-school approach, RAHS leadership developed policies and protocols to determine consequences for particular behaviors and to explicitly delineate the responsibilities of teachers and administrators around effecting restorative practices. CRA trained the entire school staff via multiple professional development days and used subsequent professional development meetings to debrief implementation challenges. These discussions informed modifications to RAHS discipline policies and procedures.

In 2017, RAHS began receiving NIJ CSSI funding as part of a study on SRM implementation. Integrating an SRM into its restorative practices model expanded RAHS’s responses to student infractions to include supports and services for behavioral health conditions that may underlie student behavior. By tracking behavior interventions used with students, RAHS determined that students could be referred to a restorative circle and receive a behavioral health screening if they met any of the following criteria: 1) were suspended during the current semester; 2) received three behavior interventions within a two-week period; or 3) received five behavior interventions in a semester. RAHS also implemented universal behavioral health screening with the goal of identifying students who may be in need of additional supports or services before the need manifests as a school infraction or more serious incident. Students flagged by the screening tool are referred for further assessment by an appropriate community-based service program.

TABLE 4: RAHS SUSPENSION AND INFRACTION DATA

	2016-17	2018-2019	% Decrease
ReNews Suspension	162	127	25%
Suspension Days	414	354	15%
Average # Infractions	120	81	32.5%
	2016-17	2018-2019	% Decrease
# student referrals to high-level interventions	103	8	92.2%

ReNew’s suspensions dropped from 162 in the 2016-2017 school year to 121 in 2019, a 25 percent decrease. In that same timeframe, the number of suspension days decreased from 414 to 354, a 15 percent decrease, and the annual number of infractions decreased from 120 to 81. Concurrently, student referrals to high-level interventions like restorative circles have also decreased, from 103 in the 2017-2016 school year to 8 in the 2018-2019 school year. RAHS staff attribute these outcomes to teachers’ increased ability to respond to student behaviors early with low-level, de-escalating

interventions such as restorative conversations. There has also been a school-wide embrace of responses that keep students in school. This paradigm shift enables staff members to explore non-exclusionary responses to disruptions that include restorative practices as well as other methods, such as behavior management contracts.

Recommendations

As both research and practice illustrate, restorative practices show efficacy as a response to student infractions. On-the-ground experience also suggests that augmenting restorative practice integration with access to robust behavioral health supports has the potential to further reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices, but further research in this area is warranted. While variations in implementation and evaluation do not currently enable in-depth comment on the differential effectiveness of restorative practices across infraction types and demographic factors, schools using or considering restorative practices should also consider the following suggestions.

<p>To augment the use of restorative practices, create or expand student access to a robust behavioral health service and support system by using in-school resources or referral partnerships with community-based providers.</p>	<p>Review and revise, as necessary, local and state school discipline policies and protocols that work at cross-purposes with the integration and implementation of restorative and school responder approaches.</p>
<p>Offer staff meaningful and consistent training and support regarding restorative practices as well as adolescent development and mental health and race- and ability-conscious approaches to school discipline.</p>	

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About

The National Center for Youth Opportunity and Justice aims to improve life opportunities for youth by advancing policy and practice improvements that ensure the well-being of youth, families, and communities.

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