

How Do Restorative Practices Work? Educators Share Implementation Tips



By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) — November 02, 2023 ⌚ 13 min read



— iStock/Getty



Larry Ferlazzo

Opinion Contributor, Education Week

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.

More and more schools are using restorative practices instead of punitive policies to deal with conflicts.

This multipart series will share practical suggestions from educators who have actually been using restorative practices “on the ground.” You can read a previous series on this same topic [here](#).

Today’s contributors were also guests on [my 10-minute BAM! Radio Show](#). You can also find a list of, and links to, [previous shows here](#).

Restorative Circles

Marie Moreno, Ed.D., is an educator and administrator with over 20 years of experience specializing in newcomer and second-language acquisition. She is passionate about refugee and immigrant education, focusing on social and emotional needs and newcomer programming:

Restorative practices—also known as restorative school discipline practices—are procedures or structures that foster a sense of community to prevent conflict, that act on misconduct, or that mend the harm caused by another student by accepting responsibility and restoring relationships.

The traditional student-discipline model does not teach students how to resolve problems and is typically punitive toward students. Take an altercation with another

student. Principals or assistant principals usually separate the students and suspend them for one to three days. This separation only provides a “break,” but the issues are evident and will continue to be a problem unless they are addressed.

Using the restorative approach, students will participate in a staff-led “restorative circle” to discuss the fight and be required to do community service instead of getting suspended. The restorative circle focuses on repairing the harm done during a specific incident to ensure that all involved are respected within our school community.

As a school principal, keeping students in classrooms is essential for student success. Training counselors, teachers, and administrators to utilize restorative practices must occur for this approach to be effective. I recall reviewing my discipline data and noticed over 700 students were sent to in-school or out-of-school suspension throughout the year. In just one year, I reduced the number of suspensions the following year to only 200!

Below is the outline we used. Restorative circles take practice, patience, and flexibility. I can tell you when done effectively, students will ask for “a circle” because they want to be responsible. Yes, even my most challenging students would ask—even if they wanted to be secretive about it. Find a way to convene one without “squealing” on the person asking for the circle. It made a huge difference in our school culture.

Circle Conference Script 1. The moderator welcomes the group and states why a circle is being convened. What harm are the participants trying to repair?

2. Introductions of each person using a talking piece.

3. Discussion of norms. The moderator (counselor/teacher/administrator) states the following:

§ The circle is a sacred space.

§ Refrain from speaking unless holding the talking piece.

§ Hold reactions/comments until the talking piece is received.

§ Be respectful in body language and speech.

§ Keep conversation confined to within the group unless you discuss hurting yourself or others.

§ Speak the truth as you see it.

§ Everyone will get the same respect and be equals in the circle.

“Can we agree to these norms?”

§ **[Action]** Pass the talking piece to hear responses.

4. Round One: Each person will describe the incident. What happened?

5. Round Two: What were the individuals thinking when it happened?

6. Round Three: Discuss impacts. Who was harmed? What impact has the effect had on each person?

7. Round Four: What can be done to repair the harm? (commitments)

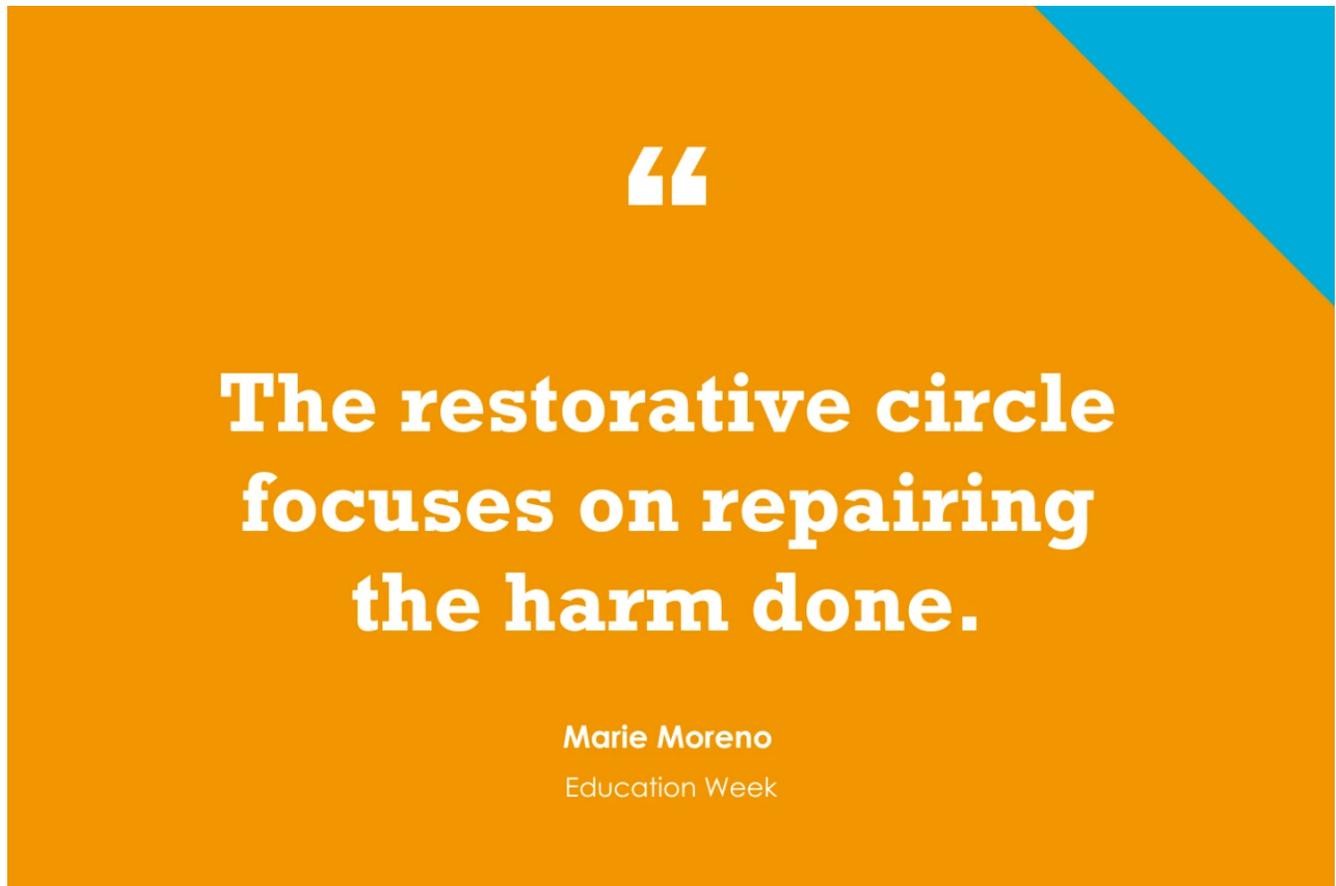
8. The moderator restates commitments (responsibilities) and gets buy-in to reach a consensus.

§ The moderator will pass the talking piece around and ask circle participants to share

one word that they would use to describe the circle.

§ The moderator closes out the circle with words of encouragement.

9. Circle information and agreements will be typed, and all participants should sign to show agreement. A template/contract can be created to insert outcomes into the document easily.



‘Apologies of Action’

Chandra Shaw is a seasoned educator with more than 25 years of experience in literacy instruction. As a literacy consultant at one of her state’s regional service centers, Chandra specializes in designing and implementing effective, evidence-based literacy programs that

meet the needs of diverse learners:

The most basic definition of restorative practices in schools is a process of using specific protocols and/or strategies to intentionally restore relationships between individuals and strengthen or facilitate connections within the school community as a whole. The focus is more on proactively repairing and building relationships as a way to prevent problems rather than strictly utilizing punitive reactive measures.

Before the term “restorative practices” became a popular buzzword, as a classroom teacher, I utilized apologies of action with students as ways for them to fix the relationships with their classmates when they’d done harm. The goal of an apology of action is to teach students that making amends is more than simply giving a verbal apology. Genuine apologies require that students take responsibility for their actions and take steps to repair the relationship.

What I loved so much about this strategy was that it taught students how to both ask for and make an apology that is a realistic and logical consequence of a hurtful situation.

For example, I once had a boy tease another student about their name, causing the student to cry. After speaking with both students, I learned that the real reason behind the teasing was that the boy actually wanted attention from the other student. We brainstormed together and came to the agreement that he would create an acrostic poem of the student’s name, which included the qualities about the student he admired. He took such care creating the poem and even asking another student to help him illustrate the poem. Not only was the student whose name had been made fun of extremely happy with the poem they received, as evidenced by them keeping it in their notebook cover for the entire year, the young boy learned that it felt much better to build someone else up rather than to hurt their feelings.

He went on to create several other poems for students in the class that year. Not

because he teased them, but because they were so impressed by the poem he'd made, that they asked him to create ones for them.

Throughout my years of teaching, I often asked for apologies of action from students. I never "forced" students to apologize. A disingenuous apology isn't something I'd ever want from a student. I'd simply say, "I think you owe me an apology, when you genuinely feel it in your heart." Sometimes those apologies would come immediately, sometimes a few days later in the hallways for older students, but they *always* came. That's the important part because the student and I repaired our relationship.

There were times when I gave apologies of action to students when I was the one who'd done something wrong. Perhaps, I'd mistakenly accused a student of cheating or being involved in a conflict when they weren't. My rule was that my teacher's apology had to be as big and as public as the accusation had been and was usually followed by a hug or high-five. Some students asked me for songs or poems, and I was happy to oblige.

Utilizing something like an apology of action or any other restorative type of practice in schools such as restorative circles can be effective in changing students' harmful behavior and building healthy relationships between students and teachers. Ideas like this can show students that there is always room for improvement and perhaps a chance to redeem and restore important relationships.

“
The goal of an apology of action is to teach students that making amends is more than simply giving a verbal apology.

Chandra Shaw

Education Week

‘Thousands of Years Old’

Angela M. Ward, Ph.D., is an anti-racist educator with over 25 years of experience in education. She is a professional learning connoisseur focused on creating identity-safe schools and workplaces. Follow her @2WardEquity on Instagram & Twitter and visit <http://2wardequity.com/blog/> to subscribe to the 2Ward Equity newsletter:

Restorative practices are thousands of years old. Often, the practices are mistakenly thought to have originated in the criminal-justice system. Actually, restorative practices originated in the cultures of Indigenous peoples in the Americas and on other continents as a means to build community, repair harm, and maintain harmony in the community.

In schools, restorative practices are a crucial part of a successful Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS).

o **Tier 1** – All students and adults engage in building community, trust, and rapport to support the development of a strong classroom and school community. At this tier, social-emotional skill development is important and is nurtured as staff and students spend time together in circle conversations, small-group conversations, and one on one. This is the tier through which all other tiers ebb and flow, where community is built through a concentrated effort to build trusting relationships.

This tier has to be the tier of focus for restorative practices to support student success. As I worked to support successful implementation of restorative practices in schools, this foundational tier was the one to which we reintroduced students when conflict occurred. Our goal was not to push students out of school but to provide intervention, support, and services to get them back to tier 1.

o **Tier 2** – A percentage of students who have engaged at Tier 1 need additional supports academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. At this tier, students engage with adults and their peers in small impromptu conversations to support a student's ability to remain connected to the classroom. Here, students may engage in small-group circles, classroom dialogue, etc. The goal is to provide support that enables a student to return to tier 1 engaging with all students and adults.

o **Tier 3** – Schools that focus “restorative practices” strictly on repair of harm between victims and offenders at Tier 3 erase the roots of the practice using it strictly as an alternative to discipline. At this tier in a school focused on the indigenous roots of the practice, adults recognize they need a little more help engaging the student's family more than the typical call home or report on their progress. The adults in the school collaborate and partner with families and organizations to fulfill an intervention need providing the student with the support they need to return to tier 2.

The ultimate goal in a restorative-practices-focused school is to return students to tier 1 where general education supports are available. The adults work with the student to build the skills to be able to monitor their own needs and advocate for themselves.

“

**Restorative practices
are a crucial part of a
successful Multi-tiered
System of Support
(MTSS).**

Angela M. Ward

Education Week

‘Restoring Any Damages Caused’

David Upegui is a Latino immigrant who found his way out of poverty through science. He currently serves as a science teacher at his alma mater, Central Falls High School in Rhode Island and as an adjunct professor of education. He is the co-author of the upcoming book: Integrating Racial Justice Into Your High-School Biology Classroom: Using Evolution to Understand Diversity:

As a trained biologist, when I think of restoration, I think of the concept of ecosystem

restoration, a process in which people assist in the recovery of ecosystems that have been degraded or destroyed by human actions. As teachers in our classrooms, we know that human actions, similar to ecosystems, can cause damages that must be restored. In our school, we have moved away from exclusively punitive approaches and now use restorative practices to address situations that require remediation.

For us, the key is communication and transparency. As a classroom teacher, I have to nurture and help students to appreciate how their behaviors are affecting our learning community. Subsequently, if some of these behaviors degrade or damage our learning environment, then students (and teachers) must participate in actively restoring any damages caused.

For example, if a student refuses to comply with a request for putting away their cellphone, and this leads to removal from our classroom, I will follow up with them and have a conversation about why their behavior matters and ask for suggestions on how my lessons can be more engaging. Similarly, if we as a class have a difficult day, we will come together to discuss ways in which we can do better and prepare ourselves for the future.

I often remind students that knowledge is power, and if they don't know something (like how water is treated after it leaves their homes or how climate change is affecting humans), then someone (or groups of "someones") have power over them. Therefore, education is about empowerment, and if there are actions that are getting in the way of that empowerment, these must be addressed, and restoration must be created. Part of our jobs is to help students to navigate the challenging and ever-changing world and guide them as they mature into the people who will solve humanity's problems.

“
**The key is
communication and
transparency.**

David Upegui
Education Week

Thanks to Marie, Chandra, Angela, and David for contributing their thoughts!

The new question of the week is:

What are restorative practices, and what do they look like in schools?

.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@Larryferlazzo](#).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).

Just a reminder; you can subscribe and receive updates from this blog via [email](#) (The RSS feed for this blog, and for all Ed Week articles, has been changed by the new redesign—new ones are not yet available). And if you missed any of the highlights from the first 11 years of this blog, you can see a categorized list below.

- [It Was Another Busy School Year. What Resonated for You?](#)
- [How to Best Address Race and Racism in the Classroom](#)
- [Schools Just Let Out, But What Are the Best Ways to Begin the Coming Year?](#)
- [Classroom Management Starts With Student Engagement](#)
- [Teacher Takeaways From the Pandemic: What's Worked? What Hasn't?](#)
- [The School Year Has Ended. What Are Some Lessons to Close Out Next Year?](#)
- [Student Motivation and Social-Emotional Learning Present Challenges. Here's How to Help](#)
- [How to Challenge Normative Gender Culture to Support All Students](#)
- [What Students Like \(and Don't Like\) About School](#)
- [Technology Is the Tool, Not the Teacher](#)
- [How to Make Parent Engagement Meaningful](#)
- [Teaching Social Studies Isn't for the Faint of Heart](#)
- [Differentiated Instruction Doesn't Need to Be a Heavy Lift](#)
- [How to Help Students Embrace Reading. Educators Weigh In](#)
- [10 Strategies for Reaching English-Learners](#)
- [10 Ways to Include Teachers in Important Policy Decisions](#)
- [10 Teacher-Proofed Strategies for Improving Math Instruction](#)
- [Give Students a Role in Their Education](#)
- [Are There Better Ways Than Standardized Tests to Assess Students? Educators Think So](#)

- [How to Meet the Challenges of Teaching Science](#)
- [If I'd Only Known. Veteran Teachers Offer Advice for Beginners](#)
- [Writing Well Means Rewriting, Rewriting, Rewriting](#)
- [Christopher Emdin, Gholdy Muhammad, and More Education Authors Offer Insights to the Field](#)
- [How to Build Inclusive Classrooms](#)
- [What Science Can Teach Us About Learning](#)
- [The Best Ways for Administrators to Demonstrate Leadership](#)
- [Listen Up: Give Teachers a Voice in What Happens in Their Schools](#)
- [10 Ways to Build a Healthier Classroom](#)
- [Educators Weigh In on Implementing the Common Core, Even Now](#)
- [What's the Best Professional-Development Advice? Teachers and Students Have Their Say](#)
- [Plenty of Instructional Strategies Are Out There. Here's What Works Best for Your Students](#)
- [How to Avoid Making Mistakes in the Classroom](#)
- [Looking for Ways to Organize Your Classroom? Try Out These Tips](#)
- [Want Insight Into Schooling? Here's Advice From Some Top Experts](#)

I am also creating a [Twitter list including all contributors to this column.](#)

Reprints, Photocopies and Licensing of Content

All content on Education Week's websites is protected by copyright. No part of this publication shall be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic or otherwise, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Readers may make up to 5 print copies of this publication at no cost for personal, non-commercial use, provided that each includes a full citation of the source. For additional print copies, or for permission for other uses of the content, visit www.edweek.org/help/reprints-photocopies-and-licensing-of-content or email reprints@educationweek.org and include information on how you would like to use the content. Want to seamlessly share more EdWeek content with your colleagues? Contact us today at pages.edweek.org/ew-for-districts-learn-more.html to learn about how group online

subscriptions can complement professional learning in your district or organization.

Copyright © 2023 by Editorial Projects in Education, Inc. All rights reserved.