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'Restorative Practices': Discipline But Different

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Baltimore

When the student-government president here at City Springs Elementary/Middle School turned into the class clown last school year and began treating teachers disrespectfully, administrators had many options for how to deal with him, including sending him home for a few days to cool his heels.

But the "restorative practices" approach the school uses took educators in a different direction. They called the boy's mother to work out a punishment that would be more fitting. Her idea: Strip him of his title. The school agreed and also required the student to tell the whole school at an assembly that he didn't deserve to be president.

It was the same sort of scenario, on a smaller scale, that any politician found in the wrong might have to face.

"If we suspended him for two or three days, what would it teach him?" Assistant Principal Debita Basu said.

At **City Springs** and many other schools across the country, restorative practices are about holding students accountable and getting them to right a wrong. The approach is getting more notice than ever as criticism grows of zero-tolerance disciplinary policies that often require out-of-school suspension and expulsion. Educators are turning to restorative practices, peer courts in middle and high schools, and related efforts in the hopes of changing students' bad behaviors rather than simply kicking them out of school as punishment and risking disconnecting them from school altogether.

"It's about building relationships and having [students] do what you want them to do because they want to do it—not because they're afraid of what the consequences are," said Rhonda Richetta, the principal of City Springs, which has 624 students. "We really want kids to change."

Criminal-Justice Roots

Restorative practices in schools originate from a criminal-justice technique in which convicts are held accountable in part by facing the people they have harmed. The strategies have been around for years, said Sally Wolf, the executive director of **Illinois Balanced and Restorative Justice**, in Paxton, and are used around the country and internationally. But the concept still has skeptics, a sentiment she used to share.

Danny Perez, a 7th grader at Davidson Middle School in San Rafael, Calif., answers questions in front of the school's peer court as Kristy Treewater, his assistant principal, looks on. Some schools are using peer courts and other "restorative" disciplinary practices as an alternative to suspension. In trouble for fighting, Danny received a "sentence" that included writing letters of apology, undergoing tutoring, and joining a school sports team.
—Sarah Rice for Education Week

"I thought it was too touchy-feely," said Ms. Wolf, whose nonprofit organization trains school staff in restorative techniques. But children "do want to work out things. They do want to be safe."

One noticeable characteristic of many schools using a restorative approach is in the way teachers and other staff members speak with students: They address students in ways that are meant to elicit empathy.

Instead of snapping at a student to stop talking or demanding to know why he or she is interrupting a lesson, a teacher might say, "I spent a lot of time planning my lesson today and I can't get through it," Ms. Richetta said, thus helping students understand how their behavior affects others.

For City Springs teacher Kellie McGuire, the restorative practice approach once seemed as disruptive as her students' misbehaviors. She found herself stopping class frequently to deal with mouthy, misbehaving children. Her attitude, inherited from her previous years of experience at another school was: "Suspend this kid. Get him out of my room."

But she and other teachers learned to build relationships with their students. They gather students, as often as once or twice a day, in a circle. The teacher begins by asking and answering a question. Then students take turns answering the same question. A teacher might ask students whether they've ever broken a bone or what they want to see in their next class president. The goal is for all to share their feelings, express what's on their mind, and learn about each other.

Circles can be impromptu, to defuse a situation quickly, get students talking about what they were thinking when they behaved a certain way, and ask them how they'll make the situation right.

"I have this one kid, he used to get mad and say 'I hate you,' " Ms. McGuire said. She told the student, a 3rd grader, how his words stung. Now, when he gets angry, he briefly puts his head down on his desk and doesn't say what he's thinking—even double-checking with her to make sure his offensive thoughts haven't escaped his lips. "He knows it hurts my feelings," she said.

When a situation warrants it, the circle approach can be used more formally. In these conferences, everyone talks through an incident—say, a fight between two students—with parents and advocates for both students on hand.

Special Series: Rethinking Discipline

Zero-tolerance policies, which require out-of-school suspension or expulsion for certain inappropriate behaviors, have become the go-to disciplinary approach in many schools. But research suggests some downsides: Such punishments may not change students' behavior and are often meted out unfairly. This article is the first in a four-part series exploring alternative approaches.

This week: The aim of "restorative practices" disciplinary techniques is to get students to right a wrong. The hope is that they'll also learn how their actions affect others.

Next week: The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, approach may be a lot of work, schools say, but it aims to change students' behavior for the long haul.

Week of Oct. 29: Without solid classroom-management skills, teachers may struggle to keep students engaged, on task, and out of trouble.

Week of Nov. 5: Suspending students, but keeping them in school, can prevent disengagement and dropouts.

Efforts in Chicago

At **Christian Fenger Academy High School** in south Chicago, for example, when a student was chased down and threatened with physical harm for kissing the wrestling-team captain's girlfriend, a conference yielded an agreement between the students' parents to contact one another if the hostility escalated. And the wrestling captain and the competitor for his girlfriend's heart, a student with disabilities who was a loner, ended up eating lunch together every day after that, said Robert Spicer, the dean overseeing restorative-justice efforts at the public school.

The alternative, Mr. Spicer said, was that the students "would have all been suspended and their wrestling season shut down."

Developing a school culture that defaults to healing takes work and buy-in from the whole school, Mr. Spicer and other restorative-practices proponents acknowledge.

"The biggest trouble that we have is people say, 'It sounds good but it's pie in the sky. People just aren't going to do it. It takes too much time,' " Ms. Wolf said. But advocates say additional instructional time emerges because teachers are less likely to be interrupted by students, and students spend more time in school and less in the principal's office.

Ofelia Ajeatas listens to her son, Danny, promise he will not make her miss work again to attend peer court.
—Sarah Rice for Education Week

"Over time, the students seen in the office stop coming. My hope is that the issues will not be something that we have to deal with ever again," said Ms. Richetta, the principal at City Springs, a charter school that serves students in its surrounding neighborhood.

Her school has used the restorative-practices approach for about five years.

The school, where most students come from low-income families and most are African-American, has cut its suspension numbers by about three-quarters in the last few years, Ms. Richetta said, but reshaping students' behavior is still a work in progress. Her school still suspends students on occasion, she pointed out, although their behavior is still discussed and its origins understood.

A calmer school environment takes time, and results may not be immediately apparent, said Mary Jo Hebling, who trains people in restorative practices at the **International Institute for Restorative Practices** in Bethlehem, Pa., where City Springs' staff members and hundreds of other educators were trained in recent years.

While the approach could be a tough sell with students, too, Mr. Spicer of Fenger High said their reactions can be surprising.

"They're open to even the crazy stuff—as long as you are talking to them about why this is important, where this comes from," he said.

For teachers, the approach requires training. Groups like the Illinois organization Ms. Wolf runs offer training relatively inexpensively. And the private restorative-practices institute is a graduate school devoted exclusively to teaching about the approach.

Fenger, where the majority of students are black and come from low-income families, shifted to restorative practices three years ago, when it was designated a turnaround school by the district. Staff members had to reapply for their positions, and Mr. Spicer, a new principal, and other new administrators were brought in.

Within a few weeks of the start of school, 16-year-old honors student Derrion Albert **was beaten with railroad ties** about two blocks away. He later died.

"His death brought attention to youth violence," Mr. Spicer said, affirming his own convictions about restorative practices. "Someone had to be the point person for peace."

Since then, Fenger has experienced a sharp decline in misconduct—a drop of about 70 percent. Student enrollment fell significantly after the turnaround efforts began, too, but is now back on the rise, and violent and drug-related misconduct has decreased sharply.

'Trial' by 'Jury'

Another strategy employed at Fenger and other schools looking for alternative ways to handle student misconduct is the peer jury.

One such school is the 900-student **Davidson Middle School** in San Rafael, Calif., where student suspensions have dropped from more than 300 in the 2009-10 school year to 27 last school year.

At Davidson, students now have a choice when they commit misdeeds other than those for which state or federal laws require suspension: They can either be disciplined by their classmates or face suspension. In peer court, students face a panel of five or six classmates who have been trained to listen—and interrogate.

Ms. Treewater counsels Danny after his peer-court session. He was "sentenced" to write apology letters, attend tutoring, and practice with the football or wrestling teams.
—Sarah Rice for Education Week

When Superintendent Michael Watenpaugh came to San Rafael five years ago, he found a district that hadn't adapted well to a shift in demographics. This bedroom city to San Francisco had gone from mostly white, middle-class families to about 60 percent Latino enrollment, including many poor children. Student achievement was "tanking," he said.

"What we needed was kids in school. Suspending kids for five days was truly going against what our goal was and wasn't proving effective in changing kids' behavior," Mr. Watenpaugh said.

When his son, Jacob, was found with a small knife in his backpack, the teenager chose peer court.

Classmates peppered the 7th grader with questions about why he thought bringing a knife to school was OK and whether he considered that it would be dangerous if someone else found it. They delved into his academic record, too, noting his lagging grades in science and mathematics. They questioned his choices of company and wondered if he was making bad decisions. His "sentence" was to write a paper on bringing knives to school and decisionmaking, 20 hours of community service, and five tutoring sessions each in science and math. Jacob had 21 days to finish the tasks or be suspended.

Since then, Mr. Watenpaugh said, Jacob has "never thought of taking anything in his backpack that shouldn't be there."

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"Our whole focus will be on what does the student need to get back on track instead of what do we need to do to punish them," said Judy Wolfe, who supervises the student-court program in the 20,000-student **Syracuse, N.Y., school district**, where several schools use the approach. As in San Rafael, student court typically convenes during lunch, and the records of students who carry out their sentences are wiped clean.

Student court can actually resolve problems and provides consequences that have meaning, and students rarely reappear in her courtroom, Ms. Wolfe said.

"It takes more time," than suspending students, she said of peer court, "but if you want to look down the line, which is more productive?"

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