

# Don't Give Up on Restorative Practice!



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Restorative practices can transform school cultures—if educators see them as more than a quick “behavior fix.”

## Abstract



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## Abstract

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One promising shift in direction after the pandemic has been educators' efforts to rethink notions of school culture and how to respond to challenging student behavior. Many schools are rethinking traditional methods of dealing with student behavior that rely on rewards and lean heavily on punishment of "infractions"—by writing referrals, sending students to the principal, or suspending students—and trying for more care-based responses. Recognizing the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates for Black, Indigenous, and Latino students, the

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and the cultural incongruity between schools and many students, schools have sought alternative ways to create positive environments.

One approach that has garnered great interest is restorative practice. Rooted in Indigenous forms of peacemaking and community building, this approach focuses on relationships, healing, and reconciliation within a community. Several established models for building school culture and promoting positive behavior—such as Responsive Classroom and the Restorative Resources tool kit—use concepts and strategies drawn from this approach. The spirit of restorative practice recognizes culture as a living entity that everyone plays a role in creating. While many schools tend to focus on those restorative practices that address problem behavior or situations in which someone has wronged another, the overall goal of restorative practice goes further: to use proactive schoolwide strategies to create a sense of community, build healthy relationships, and develop everyone's conflict resolution skills and sense of belonging and agency.

Restorative practices involve community-building rituals and routines like talking circles, where stories are shared and conversations happen, and community dialogues on issues requiring deeper understanding and perhaps new policies. Among other resources, there are class routines that let students check in with a trusted adult at school and examples of teacher responses to misbehavior designed to help students learn from mistakes. Actions taken through a restorative approach ideally set the stage for fewer challenging behaviors. A key tenet in addressing disruptive behavior is treating each community member with a belief in their worthiness and dignity and strengthening relationships between community participants. When accountability is necessary, restorative justice protocols acknowledge harm and collectively identify ways to repair it. For instance, school tribunals respond to behavior incidents by creating a group of trained facilitators

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can serve as a counter to harmful practices that disproportionately affect - marginalized students.

## When Schools Embraced Restorative Practices

Many families, communities, and students have long requested that schools shift to disciplinary practices that better support students. So, over the last 10–15 years, it's been encouraging to witness an outpouring of support for and increased investment in approaches to behavior focused on building school culture, choosing culturally congruent responses, and supporting every child.

Around 2012, then-President Obama embraced the shift toward restorative practices on a national level, and the federal government began providing funding for efforts based on the approach in schools. At that time, I was a school leader trying to address the issue of disproportionality in office referrals for Black students and students with IEPs. I was seeking a better way to support students and teachers and address behavior more positively. When I and some colleagues discovered restorative practice, we felt affirmed and optimistic.

School and district leaders began to champion the move to adopt restorative practices and programs, and in the years just before the COVID-19 pandemic, many districts made full-on commitments to the approach. At numerous schools, teachers—with good intentions—embraced restorative practices. Educators sought high-quality professional development on it, and schools hired restorative justice coordinators. The language of restorative circles became prevalent in conversations among administrators about responding to behavior. Educators who had long championed restoration became cautiously optimistic. And a lot of

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Many of us saw restorative practices in schools as a needed step toward addressing harm done to students from minoritized backgrounds by decades of traditional discipline methods. For example, as Muhammad Khalifa noted in his book *Culturally Responsive School Leadership* (Harvard Education Press, 2018), having police in schools is standard in many schools with Black and Latino students. Viral videos have shown the aggressive, violent tactics sometimes used with “disruptive” students. In one Michigan school district Khalifa cites, Black students made up 18 percent of the student body, yet 60 percent of the suspensions. (Similar data can be found in many U.S. school districts.) And the school-to-prison pipeline is closely correlated with traditional approaches to student behavior.

However, despite initial enthusiasm, an increasing number of educators now appear ready to give up on restorative practices. In the past two school years—as schools have focused on learning loss, teacher burnout, and an increase in student behavior issues—I’ve heard from school leaders that there has been backtracking on restorative approaches. Many teachers express concerns that restorative approaches don’t work.



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**suitable for all students (often coded language for students of color).**

What's interesting is that the move toward restorative practice seemed to come from a deeper clarity around root causes for problematic school cultures and student behavior—lack of resources and affirmation, cultural incongruence, systemic bias, etc. There was much dialogue around how traditional discipline wasn't focused on truly caring for kids. But even with moral clarity, resistance to restorative practices, *especially* for students of color, has grown. Some express concerns that practices like tribunals are merely ways to avoid addressing student misbehavior or to make excuses for not suspending students. They argue that these practices don't teach students real lessons or create lasting change. Some claim students who misbehave need harsher consequences and that restoration isn't suitable for all students (often coded language for students of color—the very students who restorative practices are intended to help).

## **The Reformist Lens**

How is it that educators agreed schools needed to transform disciplinary systems, yet now are calling for a return to old practices? I believe we have been misled by the *reformist* mindset, which is often at odds with restorative practices. Let's look at how this has happened.

### ***Mistaking Reform for Repair***

One of the biggest misconceptions associated with restorative practice is that it is

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dominant approaches to change in schools, especially those with high populations of marginalized students, is to find the problem and fix it. Yet one reason change isn't happening may be that many institutions are only trying restorative actions connected to "fixing" perceived problems like behavior, not the spectrum of approaches to build community and transform relationships.

This is part and parcel of schools' tendency to make changes through the *reformist* lens; working for change (reform) in schools traditionally involves identifying problems, finding solutions, and implementing them. A reformist orientation tends to focus on surface-level changes rather than transformation. This leads educators to address challenging behavior and disparities in how various student groups are punished without examining how systems operate and who they operate for.

Despite families and community members advocating for ways of addressing behavior rooted in relationships and care, leaders and educators often translate these ideas into action through a reformist lens. Leaders identify the issue (disproportionality in suspension data), then look for the solution. Who has a curriculum or program to fix the issue? The leaders decide to "use restorative practices to address the disproportionality issue," look for restorative practice trainers and places to fit in the learning, and write new policies, often with little input from teachers, students, or the community. They focus on faithfully following the "program" and looking at data to see if the problem is being "fixed." This approach erodes families' trust that real change will come. While listening campaigns and empathy interviews with families have become routine in schools, the reformist orientation to change often fails to demonstrate that educators are ready to truly *listen* and go beyond shallow solutions.

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for using restorative approaches to build relationships and school culture, the goal is often to interrupt the trend of students of color being suspended disproportionately, rather than ask truly systemic questions.

### ***Asking the Wrong Things***

Questions educators can ask as they embrace a restorative approach include: How can we reimagine relationships with the students we serve? How do we create an ecosystem that fosters love, care, healing, and accountability in our schools and district? A reformist lens, by contrast, immediately shifts the focus to questions like: Who needs PD on restorative practices? How can we fit it into the summer professional development schedule? How many restorative justice coordinators can we afford? Rushing into these kinds of questions leads educators toward work that's disconnected from the underlying requests of stakeholders in our communities, especially from groups whose youth have been affected by less equitable discipline.

One key question to ask is, How can we center those who have been most harmed as we repair our community? This is partly because of the way zero-tolerance policies have caused damage, but even more so because the spirit of restorative practices in schools requires a fundamental shift in how members of the community relate to one another. Everyone has to have a seat at the table. To fully embrace a restorative approach and be culturally responsive, we must commit to dismantling what is broken and collaboratively envisioning a holistic restoration. This will look different in every school but will have a similar spirit.

I once worked with a school in Philadelphia that interpreted restoration through an Afrocentric lens. Every morning began with *Harambe*, a time to acknowledge and

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celebrate their students or act as problem solvers. When challenges arose, restorative conferences took place with at least one adult who had a close relationship with the student. This approach was about restoration through centering people, rather than fixing something.

### ***Missing the Potential***

What's most concerning about using practices associated with a restorative approach through a reformist orientation is that the original intentions behind adopting restorative practices in many schools—practices rooted in deep analysis and understanding of the need for change—are often overlooked. The originators of these practices and ways of being weren't motivated by a spirit of "fixing." Many restorative practices stem from ways some Native American tribes have—and still do—respond to conflicts by working to shape relationships through care, reciprocity, and accountability. For example, the Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne use a practice called *Kaniforjio* that resolves conflict with healing in mind. Treating deep cultural transformation as a mere reform undermines its true potential.



ASCD Connect

Can Restorative Justice Be Saved?

16:41

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While restorative practice thrives in many communities worldwide, it's not yet widespread in U.S. schools. Moving toward a school culture based on these concepts and practices means creating a reality that has never existed before: an education system in this country that consistently treats racially marginalized students with care, respect, and loving accountability.

When people aren't mindful of how their perspectives shape their behavior, it's easy to replicate existing structures, so approaching the shift through a reformist lens may lead educators to skip the envisioning process of what this new reality could look like. Much of the current system of dealing with student behavior is based on unhealthy ways of relating to one another, on responses that have caused tremendous harm to educators, families, and students. So the visioning process is paramount.

To truly transform school approaches to problematic behavior—and building community—educators need to keep four ways of being in mind.

## 1. Commit and Don't Quit

Working for equity isn't a destination but an unwavering commitment to a journey—and *this journey is not a quick one*. If equity is a moral imperative, we must re-center our commitment to those who have been least served and most harmed by our education system, especially in terms of addressing student behavior. The data on disproportionality and the human stories cannot be ignored. But undoing a system that has been fortified for more than 100 years will be a gradual process, expedited only through investment from all stakeholders. We should embark on this journey not because it is mandated, but because pursuing justice demands this level of commitment. This doesn't mean we excuse challenging behavior. The

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from reacting emotionally in the moment. Grounding ourselves in the values of the restorative approach will help. Teachers might gather at the start of each day to briefly reground themselves in this vision, and maybe check in with each other during the day to be a problem-solving support if needed.

## 2. Ensure Change Is Happening

Such commitment requires intentionally measuring whether the change we're after is happening. Traditionally, educators have focused on using measures that gauge students' academic achievement to determine if equity has been achieved. However, the commitment many communities seek goes beyond strengthening academic proficiency. It demands authentic recognition of their wants and needs, including changes to culture and policy that communicate full valuing of all - students from marginalized cultures and that use practices that hold students accountable more equitably—and measuring whether those changes happen.

Measuring the impact of restorative practices, and refining efforts as needed, is also key because educators' actions and persistence show students and families the extent to which we're willing to change our practices. When educators want to give up on something as transformative as restorative practice after only a few years of trying, it speaks volumes.

## 3. Internalize Concepts

Models and frameworks that incorporate restorative approaches and practices offer schools ways to reframe how we perceive relationships and build community in schools. However, exceptional educators have taught me that frameworks and practices are only as effective as our own study, interpretation, and internalization of the ideas behind them. For any restorative approach to make a difference, a

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mass of leaders in that school—and eventually all involved—must share an understanding of the concepts behind restorative justice and what putting them in action entails.

#### 4. Work With, Not For

Creating systems that prioritize relationships and loving accountability is challenging, and leaders shouldn't undertake this work alone. If our goal is truly to repair harm and envision new ways of being, we must join forces with those who've helped us see the serious problems with traditional discipline—especially those not well served by it.



**“ Community members don't share their stories to be heard and 'saved'; they want to be listened to.**

Community members don't share their stories to be heard and “saved”; they want to be *listened to*. They seek power sharing, problem solving, and participation in

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using relationship-based processes to build trust with and honor the perspectives of three sectors of a school community:

- *Families*: Share your intentions for shifting your practice, emphasizing your commitment. Ask for an opportunity to dream together about what a new way to consider both relationships and behavior issues might look like.
- *Teachers*: Ask teachers what they personally and systematically need to embrace (or sustain) the practices you're considering. Be ready to listen and ask questions like, How are you experiencing the shift to restorative practice? What makes you the most worried? You might ask teachers to brainstorm shifts in practice they might make with specific scenarios. Determine actions that school adults need to start, stop, or continue doing to demonstrate care for all students and hold kids accountable in a fair way.
- *Fellow leaders*: Make sure key leaders have the time needed to plan with intentionality; don't simply give them a resource guide and leave them to figure things out. Work with them to align the school's financial and resource outputs with what people in the building need to shift to more restorative policies.

## **Make the Investment!**

A promising transformation in education is within reach. But if we approach this opportunity to change school culture through a lens of reform, we may find ourselves back where we started, using practices to respond to behavior issues that often lead to harm, meanwhile wondering why students aren't responding to surface-level restorative approaches. It took a long time to create the often-

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## Reflect & Discuss

- Did you notice high enthusiasm for restorative practices in your school or among colleagues around 10 years ago? If so, has the enthusiasm stuck, or are educators you know now doubting the approach?
- What do you think of the “reformist approach” to problems Dugan describes? Have you seen it in action in a school, in terms of improving disciplinary practices or another major area? With what result?
- Was anything Dugan explained here about the background, intention, or concept of restorative practices new to you? Did anything surprise you?

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