



Get 'em while they're young: Schools improve with restorative practices

By Christy Barbee, Chief Case Coordinator

Many of us who practice restorative justice often muse wistfully: Wouldn't it be great if we taught school children about restorative approaches? Our schools seem such a logical place to begin helping children recognize the hurts they cause when they strike out at others and to work positively with them to make amends and to understand and change their behavior.

My musing usually ends with the stark knowledge that teachers and administrators are already so burdened with mandates and initiatives that they take a dim view of any approach that requires another training, another set of metrics, and another rethink of the classroom and school culture.

So when I attended a seminar in June on Restorative Practices in Schools¹, I was surprised to find educators not only willing, but eager—and in some cases already avidly practicing—restorative practices (RP) in their classrooms and whole school systems. Sponsored by the Restorative School Practices Collaborative of Maine, the workshop included mostly Mainers, but also a few from Michigan, Vermont, and New Orleans.

Maine and Vermont schools are already well along in establishing restorative practices as a means to build positive school climate and address discipline. Highly successful experiments with restorative practices have gone on in several other cities and states, including New York City, Philadelphia and Colorado, to name just a few. The Chicago Public Schools adopted a restorative justice approach to discipline two years ago. Chicago's adoption of restorative justice runs counter to conventional wisdom that it would only work in certain suburban environments.

Many of the schools who are trying out RP are doing so because so-called zero-tolerance policies have backfired, resulting in more suspensions and expulsions, more serious incidents, higher dropout rates and, in some places, the dreadful realization that school climate has been compromised, not enhanced. The American Psychological Association's Zero Tolerance Task Force recently endorsed restorative justice as a promising alternative to zero tolerance in its report "Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations."

Some very significant reductions in disciplinary actions have resulted in schools that have implemented restorative practices (see links below). Common results include reduced numbers of suspensions and expulsions, and fewer infractions that would ordinarily lead to such measures. Schools practicing restorative discipline also report reduced absenteeism and significantly increased graduation rates.

A Variety of Practices

Restorative practices can take a variety of forms in schools, but the principles are identical to those we are familiar with in restorative justice. Schools can confront harms ranging from minor disciplinary matters and rule breaking, to conflicts between school community members, to crime in the school setting or larger community.

The trainers advocated a whole-school approach that starts with "community" or "unity" circles, essentially regularly scheduled classroom, or other small-group, gatherings to build community and to accustom kids to dialog about important issues, whether educational or social.² "It's not a loss of time from the class," said one of the teachers in the workshop. "It's part of the educational process." She said such circles have helped her to develop a deeper relationship with the children she teaches.

¹ Generally, the term "restorative practices" is more commonly used in school contexts where notions of "justice" are less familiar. In this context, the term is used interchangeably.

² This concept isn't entirely foreign to our local schools; many area elementary schools employ the "Open Circle" approach to building community. Sadly, the practice is lost in middle- and high-schools.

For problem behavior and disciplinary matters, “resolution” circles or conferences can be convened by teachers, administrators, students, and in some cases parents. Some schools offer a choice between a resolution circles and traditional detention. Participants include the community affected, whether the class or another group.

For behaviors that might otherwise prompt a suspension from school, the workshop advocated formal “restorative conferences.” These are smaller than resolution circles, affording a greater degree of confidentiality; participants might include the student(s) referred, the student(s) or personnel affected, and a trained facilitator. Parents and a police officer might be included as well.

A “Soft” Response?

Most of my fellow workshopers were looking for a better way to manage the school environment; many were from communities that have experienced significant influxes of immigrant groups with resulting conflicts and incidents. Even the skeptics, including one at my table who described herself at the outset as a fairly “strict” disciplinarian, began seeing circumstances in which a restorative approach could work better than their current approaches to repetitive problems they encounter.

Of course, the number-one perceived drawback for many a skeptic (as we’ve seen in our own program) is that nagging worry about being “soft” in a circumstance in which tradition prescribes firmness and rigor. Our trainers noted that there is nothing soft about the restorative approach; children are firmly held to account. “It works better with our toughest kids than anything else,” said one counselor, a veteran of the zero-tolerance era.

As we know from our work, restorative practices are not the easy way out of a jam. Just as we at C4RJ require offenders to spend significant time listening to those they’ve harmed and examining decision making, schools are requiring students to step up and take real, considered responsibility for their actions.

One of the hallmarks of restorative practices in schools is that teachers, as members of students’ “communities,” assume a greater role in addressing discipline, rather than having justice imposed on their students through an impersonal system or by administrators who may not be as involved with students as they are. More work for teachers? Yes, initially. But those I met who have tried it say it is well worth the time because it lets them build more satisfying relationships that in turn enhance their ability to help kids learn.

Implications for C4RJ

At its June 2010 meeting, the C4RJ board set a goal over the next year to explore restorative practices, especially with respect to harassment (sometimes called bullying). This development is partly in response to recent legislation in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts around bullying issues in schools. There has been a tremendous amount of interest around this issue among staff, volunteers, and community members.

There is much to learn about restorative practices in schools, and I dearly hope that schools in our communities will take a look. For more information and data, see the following links and/or contact Christy Barbee, 978.318.3467, cbarbee@c4rj.com.

Links for More Resources

Chicago Public Schools Student Code of Conduct for the 2010-2011 School Year
<http://policy.cps.k12.il.us/documents/705.5.pdf>

“Implementing Restorative Justice in Schools,” a report from the Illinois Criminal Justice Authority
[http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL BARJ GUIDEBOOK.pdf](http://www.icjia.state.il.us/public/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL%20BARJ%20GUIDEBOOK.pdf)

“Improving School Climate: Finding from Schools Implementing Restorative Practices,”
<http://www.safersanerschools.org/pdf/IIRP-Improving-School-Climate.pdf>

“Safety with Dignity: Alternatives to the Over-Policing of Schools,” a report about six New York City public schools, by the Annenburg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and the New York Civil Liberties Union, http://www.restorativejustice.org/10fulltext/Safety_with_Dignity.pdf/view