



Supportive Schools, Safe Community The Case for Restorative Justice and Positive Behavior Systems

The Alliance for Quality Education supports implementing restorative justice practices in New York State's public schools as a means to move from a punitive system of discipline to one that aims at restoring harm, involving all stakeholders, and creating more positive relationships within the school community.

Research has shown that punitive, zero-tolerance approaches to discipline do not prevent or reduce misbehavior, but actually have negative impacts on learning.¹ As an alternative, restorative justice and positive behavior systems in schools allow teachers and leaders to emphasize relationship building instead of rules and punishment. This system nurtures school and community-based programs that improve student outcomes, support positive behaviors and opportunities, and reduce youth interaction with the criminal justice system and young adult recidivism, all while keeping students in school and addressing the underlying causes of misbehavior.

A punitive approach to discipline has disproportionately affected students of color, who experience higher rates of suspension and incarceration than their white peers. In New York City, for example, students of color account for 33% of the student population, but 53% of the students suspended are students of color. Similar disparities are found across the state. Ultimately, punitive school discipline policies have contributed to statewide graduation rates of 64% for African-American students and 63% for Latino students. An investment in programs that improve student success and reduce reliance on incarceration will undoubtedly lead to positive outcomes for students of color.

What Are Restorative Justice Practices?

Restorative justice practices are used to build a positive school community and resolve conflict by repairing harm and restoring healthy relationships through:

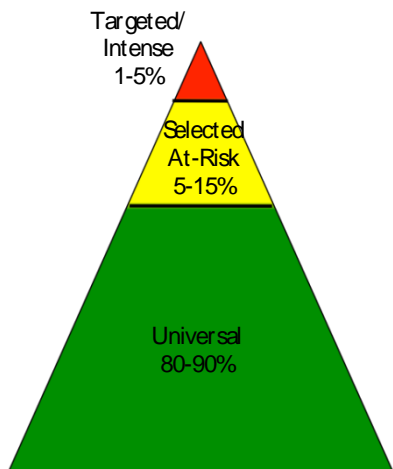
- "Classroom circles," which allows students to set academic goals, explore the curriculum, and develop core values for the classroom community;
- Teacher and staff training in classroom management in order to increase communication and work with students to reflect on the impacts of their actions; and
- The use of small group circles, fairness committees and peer juries to identify positive solutions to repair the harm done to the school community through responses such as mediation, community service, and conflict resolution.

Illinois

In Peoria, Illinois, a large number of African-American youth were entering detention for aggravated battery in one public high school. After learning more about the problem, local juvenile justice and school officials, with support from the Models for Change initiative, launched a pilot project to address fights and other incidents on campus using principles of Balanced and Restorative Justice (BARJ). Once implemented, the low-cost interventions resulted in a 35 percent reduction in school-based referrals to detention for all youth, and a 43 percent reduction for African-American youth. This pilot project served as a springboard for broader implementation of BARJ programming as an alternative to formal processing in schools and in the community.*

¹ Russell Skiba et al. [http://www.mcj.org/documents/DIV/Innovation/Brief_Partnership_with_Schools_to_Reduce_Juvenile_Justice_Referrals%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.mcj.org/documents/DIV/Innovation/Brief_Partnership_with_Schools_to_Reduce_Juvenile_Justice_Referrals%20(1).pdf) Models for Change Task Force, 2006.

Intervention and prevention approaches may include: guidance support and services to address personal and family dynamics, social and emotional learning, such as conflict resolution and peer mediation; anger management and communication skills acquisition, implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) behavior strategies, the use of alternative instructional materials and methods, enrichment services, alternative class placement, development or review of functional behavior assessments and behavior intervention plans, which should be developed and reviewed as an early intervention strategy.



What are Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports?

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a system for improving school climate as well as preventing and reducing disciplinary incidents. Employing PBIS schools develop school-wide discipline plans that include:

- Developing core values for the school community;
- Training teachers and staff in classroom management and positive behavior support strategies in order to recognize and reward positive student behavior;
- Using constructive interventions when disciplinary issues happen, such as counseling, conflict resolution, mediation, and team interventions;
- Using data to monitor and improve discipline policies to meet the needs of teachers and students.

Denver

During the 2008-09 school year, the Denver Public Schools implemented a restorative justice initiative, a voluntary dispute-resolution program. By the end of the first year, 13% of students in the district had improved attendance and 18% had improved tardiness. There was a near 90% reduction in average instances of office referrals and out-of-school suspensions*

**DPS Restorative Justice Project: Year Three Year End Report 2008-2009, September 16, 2009. Prepared and Submitted to Denver Public Schools By: Myriam L. Baker, Ph.D. Outcomes, Inc.*

Oakland

Cole Middle School in Oakland, California, implemented the practice of holding restorative justice peace circles consisting of students, teachers, and staff. During the first two years of the program, suspensions fell 87% and expulsions dropped to zero. Eighty-three percent of students at Cole also thought that restorative justice reduced fighting, and 91% thought it helped their relationships with other students. Additionally, test scores rose 74 points after only two years of the program.*

** School-based restorative justice as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies: Lessons from West Oakland Michael D. Sumner, PhD Carol J Silverman, PhD Mary Louise Frampton, JD Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice*

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