



# Building Restorative School Communities: A Guide for Creating Meaningful Work Around Student Discipline

By Nicholas Steffner, Principal, Ridgedale Middle School, Florham Park

## What Is Restorative Practices?

**T**he utilization of Restorative Practices (RP) in schools has been widely studied as an alternative method to traditional models of discipline that tend to be more exclusionary and progressively punitive. The fundamental hypothesis of Restorative Practices states that, “Human beings are happiest, healthiest, and most likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in authority do things with them, rather than to or for them” (IIRP, 2011).

This approach makes students partners in the discipline process. When students are encouraged to have input, they feel they are being treated fairly by those in authority. Schools that have had success with Restorative Practices in their communities report having a more positive school culture, higher rates of graduation and daily attendance, with less exclusionary, more effective, student discipline practices (Augustine et al., 2018).

The philosophies and restorative processes that RP employs to respond to student behavior, focus on the development of building self-regulation skills in

students, especially when the process is practiced with fidelity. Wrongdoers often come face to face with those who have been impacted by their behavior, in a way that supports both sides, to facilitate a reconciliation.

The development of a schoolwide student discipline program that is effective in shaping student behavior, building positive relationships, and instituting protocols that encourage students to be reflective on their decision-making processes should be a focus for all educational institutions. Developing and implementing systems that serve to hold students account-

able to the discipline policies, practices, and expectations of a school community, however, is a comprehensive task. Let's take a look at some of the key components to implementing effective discipline practices through the utilization of the Restorative Processes and Disciplinary Interventions.

### **It Starts with Relationships: Model the Way**

The building blocks of a restorative school community begin with the relationships that exist between the staff members in the building. As models for how we want our students to interact with us, and their peers, we must lead by example in the way we speak to, and collaborate with, all staff members in the building. As leaders, it is our responsibility to cultivate an environment that encourages, empowers, and supports the development of positive relationships between the staff in the building.

### **Restorative Processes: Where to Start**

(Figure 1: Restorative Processes Chart) - (Augustine et al., 2018, p. 17)

With the focus centered on the development of positive relationships in the building, we can turn our attention towards our interactions with students. Proactive circles are a great resource for developing community within the classroom setting. Circles provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences, in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and expected behaviors.

One way to norm this experience for students is to utilize an opening circle on the first day of school to welcome students back. On opening day, we run what we refer to as an "Olympiad," in which the first activity of the day, for all students, is a proactive circle in their SEL (Social Emotional Learning) class.

Aside from getting to know one another in the opening circle, students and staff have the opportunity to set norms for their classroom experience and interactions. Respect Agreements engage stu-

dents in the creation of classroom and school expectations that focus on four major relationships: student to student, student to staff, staff to student, and student to building.

Once these expectations are developed, they serve as the standard for when staff and administrators need to redirect, confront, and challenge a student on their behavior, as it relates to the values established in the Respect Agreement. Challenging behavior in this way encourages students to be reflective on their actions, how it has impacted the environment, why it does, or does not meet the established expectations, and how they could adjust in the future, to honor the shared agreements made in their classroom and school.

### **Restorative Disciplinary Interventions**

The infusion of Restorative Practices in combination with some of the traditional methods of student discipline that aim at removing privileges, and alter student settings, can provide a holistic balance between imposing established measures of accountability, repairing harm, and reintegrating students back into the school community. In addition to the Restorative Processes that are depicted in Figure 1, we utilize five main tools to engage students in reflective protocols that aim at repairing harm, accepting responsibility, and making assurances for future behavior.

Restorative Reflections, Restorative Projects, Respect Agreements, Atonement Statements, and Service Moments, all serve the purpose or providing wrongdoers the opportunity to reflect on their actions, provide education regarding the impact of their decision, reconcile the harm they caused others, and re-establish behavioral expectations moving forward. Students who engage in a behavior that is in conflict with the code of conduct engage in completing one, a combination, or all of these restorative interventions.

**Restorative Reflections** - Reflective assignment that utilizes Restorative Questions (See Figure 1) and

other affective questions that are specific to the wrongdoers behavior. Students complete this assignment as part of their disciplinary consequence and will meet with those affected by their actions to share their reflections. This intervention can be assigned by a teacher, in response to a low level classroom behavior, or by administrators, as part of a series of interventions.

**Restorative Projects** - Students are required to engage in educational research that dives deep into the severity, real-life consequences, violation of policies and/or code of conduct, in response to an event. Students will be required to read, answer reflection questions related to their research, and answer restorative questions to process their behavior. Students will present their findings, reflections, and commitments to those who were harmed by, or were present for the incident. This assignment is typically developed by administration, in collaboration with staff members, in order to repair harm in the environment where the wrongdoing occurred. Students will share portions of this assignment with classmates as appropriate.

**Respect Agreements** - This intervention requires students to provide commitments and assurances for the expectations of their future behavior and interactions. It serves as a requisite to the development of a behavior contract (as long as the incident does not require the development of a behavior contract as a standard response). This document is signed by the student, administrator, and referring teacher upon completion.

**Atonement Statements** - Students are required to formally script an apology letter that guides them through the process of expressing remorse, taking responsibility, making amends, and providing assurances. In most instances, students will read their statement to any individual(s) who were harmed by their action(s). If putting individuals face to face for reconciliation is not in the best interest of any of the parties, the atonement state will be shared in paper format with the

individual(s) who was harmed.

**Service Moment** - Students are engaged in a service activity that provides a relevant experience related to the student's misbehavior. (Ex. Prep a lab, clean the lunch room, break down class materials, etc.)

### Scheduling the Work: How Do You Make Time?

It is important, for the restorative process to have its intended impact, that students are provided a dedicated time to work on their various assignments. We accomplish that task by providing time for students to complete assignments in the following ways:

**Midday time out (MDTO)** - Students spend their lunch and recess period in an alternative location, supervised by a teacher who has been shared access to the restorative interventions in which students are required to complete. The K-5 Recess Law in the state of New Jersey (P.L. 2018, c.73), allows for student removal from recess no more than twice weekly, as long as students are engaged in "restorative justice activities," in grades K-5.

**Sunrise/Sunset School** - Utilizing time before (Sunrise) or after school (Sunset), to have students engage in restorative disciplinary interventions.

**In-School Suspension** - This is the preferred method of suspension. Students are still granted access to their school work, in an alternative location in the school building. Students will also engage in restorative interventions, circles, counseling, and other activities to provide education, repair harm, and set expectations for future behavior.

**Homework** - Students may be assigned restorative interventions for homework with the caveat, if it is not completed by an established time, and with considerable amounts of effort and reflection, students will be required to finish their assignment(s) in MDTO.

Figure 1: Restorative Processes Chart) - (Augustine et al., 2018, p. 17)

Table S.1

The 11 Essential Elements of the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change Program

Element	Definition
Affective statements	Personal expressions of feeling in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others
Restorative questions	Questions selected or adapted from two sets of standard questions designed to challenge the negative behavior of the wrongdoer and to engage those who were harmed
Small impromptu conferences	Questioning exercises that quickly resolve lower-level incidents involving two or more people
Proactive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas, and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values, and shared behaviors
Responsive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that engage students in the management of conflict and tension by repairing harm and restoring relationships in response to a moderately serious incident or pattern of behavior affecting a group of students or an entire class
Restorative conferences	Meetings in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of less serious incidents where all of those involved in an incident (often including friends and family of all parties) come together with a trained facilitator who was not involved in the incident and who uses a structured protocol
Fair process	Outlines a set of transparent practices designed to create open lines of communication, assure people that their feelings and ideas have been taken into account, and foster a healthy community as a means of treating people respectfully throughout a decisionmaking process so that they perceive that process to be fair, regardless of the outcome
Reintegrative management of shame	Process of listening actively to what a shamed person has to say, acknowledging the feelings of the shamed person, and encouraging the shamed person to express his/her feelings and to talk about the experience that brought about the shame response
Restorative staff community	A community that models and consistently uses restorative practices to build and maintain healthy staff relationships
Restorative approach with families	Consistently uses restorative practices in interactions with students' family members
Fundamental hypothesis understandings	Understanding the fundamental hypothesis that human beings are happiest, healthiest, and most likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in authority do things with them rather than to them or for them

SOURCE: IIRP, 2011.

## References

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## About the Author



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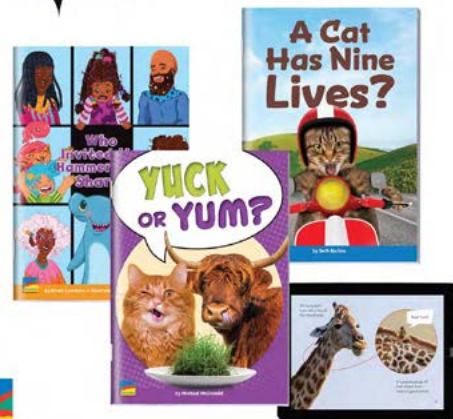
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