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February 2014



## One school's attempt to change the culture of student behavior



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# A practice in restorative discipline

## One school's attempt to change the culture of student behavior

by Shelley Seale

Jack (not his real name) was a sixth-grade special ed student with speech difficulties who told his teacher he didn't want to be at school anymore because other kids were picking on him. Rather than falling back on a disciplinary action to the other student, the teacher called both boys in to discuss the problem, asking Jack to explain to the other student how he felt and what harm was being done.

At first, the other student didn't get it; he just continued to focus on Jack's irregular speech patterns.

"I know I have a problem," Jack responded, "but every time I walk into a class, that's the first thing you guys tell me. It's making me feel really uncomfortable, and I don't even want to speak in class anymore. I just want to put my head down because I'm embarrassed. You and the other guys are cool and you have a lot of friends, but it's harder for me to do that."

Suddenly the other boy started crying. The teacher asked what caused him to cry, and that's when he admitted that he didn't know how to read.

"I just realized that I'm doing the same

thing to him, but I have a fault too. The other kids were doing it; I just thought it was funny so I joined in. I never thought about how it was making you feel," the boy said.

This incident took place at Edward H. White Middle School in San Antonio during the first year of a restorative discipline pilot program. The program was designed to combat the severe discipline problems the school was facing. Recording some of the highest discipline rates in its district, Principal Philip Carney and school administrators had come to the conclusion by early 2012 that they needed to fundamentally change the way they approached student discipline.

"Looking not only at our campus data, but also at the student discipline data from across the state, we decided that we must do a better job of helping students to improve their behavioral choices," Carney says.

About that time, he was introduced to the idea of restorative justice through his wife, who was taking a course on the topic at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Legally defined, restorative justice is a philosophical framework and a series of programs for the criminal justice system that

emphasize the need to repair the harm done to crime victims through a process of negotiation, mediation, victim empowerment and reparation.

Seeing the potential application of restorative justice principles at Ed White, Carney set up a meeting with UTSA Professor Robert Rico, who explained restorative justice and its applications to campus and district leadership teams. The intent was to create a restorative justice program within a school setting.



Robert Rico

"We adjusted the name of the program to restorative disci-

### What is restorative discipline?

- Restorative discipline is a philosophy and system-wide intervention that places relationships at the heart of the educational experience.
- The goal of restorative discipline is to change the school climate rather than merely respond to student behavior.
- Restorative discipline focuses on the harms, needs and causes of student behavior, not just the breaking of rules and dispensing of punishment.
- Restorative discipline requires a top-down commitment from school board members and administrators.
- Restorative discipline uses a whole-school approach. All administrators, teachers, staff, and students should be exposed to and/or trained in restorative processes, with periodic boosters.
- Restorative discipline engages parents and caregivers as integral members of restorative conferences and circles.
- Restorative discipline uses an internal leadership response team to spearhead the implementation and help support necessary dialogue.
- Restorative discipline calls for an outside restorative justice coordinator to serve on site at the school.
- Restorative discipline has a data system to analyze trends and inform early interventions.
- Restorative discipline takes time. It is dialogue-driven and rests on the steady establishing and deepening of relationships.



The Ed White Middle School restorative discipline leadership team and students demonstrate a typical circle to resolve a student conflict. In most circumstances, a circle would not include this many adults. Pictured left to right are Assistant Principal Kevin Curtis, Principal Philip Carney, Assistant Principal Rufus Lott, campus interventionist Jacqueline Wade, UT Austin research team member Stephanie Frogge, seventh grade student Jaylen Murray and sixth grade student Darien Maysonet.

pline, feeling that this would be a more accurate description of what we were attempting to implement at our school,” says Carney.

Restorative discipline (RD) is a prevention-oriented approach that fosters consensus-based decisions to resolve school conflict, such as bullying, truancy and disruptive behavior. Rather than focusing on punishment for breaking rules, RD focuses on the harms, needs and causes of student behavior with a goal to change the entire school climate.

“Somehow or another, the word ‘discipline’ has lost its original meaning,” says Rico, who acted as a consultant to help Ed White Middle School implement the RD model. “It does not mean punishment; discipline means to train, and that’s what restorative discipline does. It changes behaviors in a more humanistic approach to dealing with student conduct; it also enhances the learning environment in schools and reduces violence. We want these kids to learn something, and they’re not learning anything from punishment. RD does a lot of things that make kids stay in school and not drop out.”

Rico has a background in the criminal justice system, having been a police officer for 20 years before moving into public education, and was involved in a restorative justice program for juvenile offenders. The importance of implementing such a program in the school system early on, he believes, is that it prevents kids from entering the criminal justice system to begin with.

“The zero tolerance mentality came from the criminal justice system, and it has spilled over into the school setting. We are suspending and expelling kids at alarming rates, and the majority of these are minorities.”

Rico says that students who get expelled or drop out of school tend to get involved in the juvenile justice system.

“And once that happens, they’re doomed,” he says.

According to Rico, this is a big reason why there are 2.5 million people in prison in the United States.

“Eighty percent of prisoners in Texas are school dropouts. There’s a big relationship there. Something different needs to happen; zero tolerance policies aren’t working, just like punitive policies in the criminal justice side aren’t working. It’s not changing behaviors; it’s not making schools safer or doing anything else but throwing kids out of school — sometimes for very minor infractions.”

After consulting with campus stakeholders and district leadership, the Ed White



Marilyn Armour

campus decided to adopt the RD model. Rico reached out to Marilyn Armour, Ph.D., LICSW, the director of the Institute for Restorative Justice & Restorative Dialogue (IRJRD) at The University of Texas at Austin. The institute was established to build a national mindset for embracing restorative justice principles.

“It’s very difficult for restorative justice to grow when people have to invent it all by themselves,” Armour says, explaining that one of the purposes of IRJRD is to assist organizations like schools that want to implement such programs. “It’s very tricky as a concept, because it really goes against so much of the social conditioning that people have. It sounds great, but the doing of it is much thornier.”

Armour commends Carney for pushing to adapt an RD model at Ed White Middle School.

“To have someone at the top have that kind of vision and really decide to do something that is a huge experiment is very unusual,” she says.

Carney asked the institute to write up a proposal for how restorative justice principles could be used at the school, and the result became the restorative discipline pilot program. The proposal’s recommendations included:

- Do a strategic rollout, implementing the program one grade at a time, beginning with sixth grade for the 2012-2013 school year, with plans to add seventh grade and then eighth grade in the two successive years;
- Hold a two-day training for the teachers at the beginning of the school year;
- Hire a consultant to help implement the program;
- Form an on-site leadership response team at the grade level that can be responsible for day-to-day implementation; and
- Have the institute evaluate the outcomes and the implementation process on a monthly basis so that the knowledge will be transferable.

“Every little piece of this has been thought through in terms of not just what’s needed in the school, but what will help to increase credibility, to increase rigor, and what will help in terms of generating a contagion effect. Schools will always do better if they come to this voluntarily. Restorative justice is built on the idea that people participate voluntarily. A whole-school approach is

really the most effective way to do this. It needs a sense of safety for it to work, and that’s not going to be the case if the rest of the school is punitively oriented. You can’t be focused on the kids’ behavior; the focus has to be changing the climate in the school.”

Training teachers on RD principles and practices and how to apply them in the classroom was paramount. Armour decided to bring in someone with a national reputation in the field. Dr. Nancy Riestenberg from Minneapolis Public Schools conducted a two-day training in August 2012, where she introduced the foundation of RD practices to 40 Ed White teachers, staff members and administrators, along with other district personnel. Armour says it was important that other stakeholders beyond the sixth grade teachers know what the RD program looked like and what it meant.

“We purposefully brought people in, to be transparent about the process and to engage them in the learning part of it, along with the teachers,” says Armour.

After training, the model was taken back to the Ed White campus, where a framework was built for implementation.

“We began by using circles to help solve conflict and confrontation when situations arose,” Principal Carney says.

Led by an adult facilitator, a circle brings together the students in conflict in a setting that emphasizes mutual respect, deep listening and the search for a consensus-based solution. The agreed-upon solution is then written in a binding document that all circle participants sign and promise to uphold.

Says Carney, “We also formed a restorative leadership team that monitors the implementation process on the campus. Kevin Curtis, an assistant principal and the RD campus coordinator, plays a critical role in this process. He has personally worked through many of the obstacles that we have encountered, and he develops creative solutions to help the campus, teachers and students find success with RD.”

There have, of course, been challenges. Carney and Rico both agree that the biggest of those was convincing teachers that the RD model would be effective.

“Most educators operate under the paradigm that we can punish our way to better behaviors,” Carney says. “They were so used to traditional discipline that they did not expect a satisfactory change in behavior from students sitting in a circle talking about their feelings. We had to help teachers realize that these traditional practices were not

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working for the students.”

While some teachers were initially skeptical, their level of “buy in” increased dramatically once they experienced a circle and began to see changes in student behavior.

“Whenever you start something new or try to change something, you meet with resistance,” adds Rico, who says that veteran teachers seemed to be the most resistant. “They weren’t really implementing the restorative discipline, and they were the ones

who were having a lot of issues with the students. The other teachers who were actually using [the RD principles] were seeing a difference in the way students acted; the relationship between student and teacher was better.”

Another challenge was the time involved. It takes time to run a circle — time that, in some teachers’ eyes, detracts from classroom instruction. RD practices are not a quick fix, particularly if the goal is to truly change mindsets.

“When a student misbehaves, instead of saying ‘go to the office,’ it’s about stop-

ping and engaging with that student in a meaningful way,” Armour says. “It is time-consuming, but it’s about investing in the creation of a different kind of climate that pays dividends when times get tough.”

Being the first school in Texas to implement the program without an existing model to reference also presented an obstacle. But with feedback and guidance from IRJRD and Rico, the school has created a model that eventually could provide a blueprint for other schools.

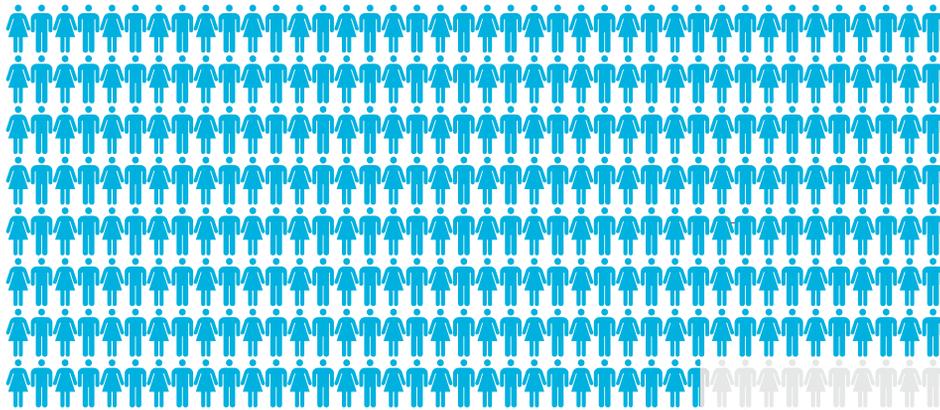
Now that Ed White Middle School is halfway through its second year of using RD practices with both sixth and seventh graders, some remarkable results are coming to light. There has been an 84 percent drop in off-campus suspensions in the past year, along with a 44 percent drop in total suspensions. Armour stresses that the drop in suspensions does not necessarily mean that there are fewer student conflicts. It simply reflects that teachers are responding to student misbehavior in a different way.

“Because only one-third of the campus was engaged in and understood restorative practices [last year], there were challenges that arose from the majority of the campus operating under a different discipline approach,” Carney says. “This year we have two-thirds of the campus operating under restorative practices, and the cultural shift is evident. You can feel the difference as you walk down the hallways. It is now a regular practice for students in conflict to seek out an opportunity to ‘circle it,’ rather than engage in a verbal or physical confrontation. It has been amazing to see the impact on the students and how quickly they have taken to this alternate way to handle conflict.”

Ultimately, the method is about building relationships. With more dialogue involved in conflict resolution, teachers often learn about issues outside of school that are impacting their students’ behavior and performance. And for students in conflict, it can be a powerful experience to have adults taking the time to look behind the behavior and ask them how they feel. They begin to see teachers as partners in their education and school experience, rather than just another authority figure.

“The kids have a lot to say,” Rico says. “It’s building a relationship, where before they didn’t have that, and that’s the biggest thing.”

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