

Restorative Justice Principles and Practices for Public Schools, submitted by Jane Nicholson

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Restorative Principles and Practices are increasingly being accepted as best practices for public schools and their communities. In the current paradigm of under-resourced schools and social disruption due to economic and other stressors, the wisdom of focusing on community and building relationship is crucial for providing positive opportunity for youth to go forward. These two goals are accomplished through safe, respectful, caring communication and inclusive inquiry about concerns, problems, and needs.

Restorative Principles and Practices cultivate calm, confidence, self-awareness, accountability, and pro-social skills. By using the formats of restorative communication, we talk things out in a safe and respectful setting—whether issues and concerns, personal experience, successes, learning or problem-solving. The chief format is the talking circle, where all those participating—be it a class, an after-school group, or a particular issue with all the stakeholders—gather face-to-face. Repairing the harm (not always an act, but a harmful situation, for example) is our first concern. By attending to concerns and harms, we ensure that going forward new opportunities for a positive community are sustained. (Restorative conversation can be effective one-on-one also.)

Whatever the first step or steps toward building and sustaining a restorative culture in school, training of staff comes into play. In the case of behavior intervention and disciplinary diversion, Restorative skill sets give us a different lens through which to view problematic behavior. Because it is not possible (or desirable) to have a “rule” for every misbehavior, we need to collect ourselves restoratively to remember that conflict is an opportunity to communicate for the betterment of community and individuals. Restorative Justice principles and practices focus on: 1) the meanings behind behaviors, 2) directly related and proportionate responses, and 3) the possible restorative

outcome. These outcomes include: repairing the harm, repairing relationships, accepting accountability for one's actions, meeting everyone's needs from skills to resources, determining root causes where possible, and providing positive opportunities going forward.

By building self-awareness in the face of need or disruption, we can respond more calmly and effectively. Self-aware calmness leads us to trust one another and the process we are involved in. We can say that Restorative Justice features a holistic approach because it allows us both to attend to what is important to us and to do so in a comprehensive way. Participation in circle builds pro-social skills such as honesty, calm, self-awareness, empathy, consideration, respect, and trust. Using these skills, we are increasingly able to discuss concerns and goals, share stories, and resolve conflicts. We can reduce unresolved problems and their root causes, thus alleviating stress and anxiety. We do this collectively, so that many benefit from community practices. When needs are stated, in circle whether emotional or material, we address those rather than considering them to be distractions. By learning the power of gathering together and being accountable to one another, healthy relationships prosper and positive opportunities emerge.