

Promoting Healthy School Communities Through Restorative Practices

Many schools are looking for strategies to strengthen relationships and belonging, address challenging behaviors, and promote student and staff well-being. Restorative practices are an evidence-informed approach that can help schools take action toward these goals.

Restorative practices promote school connectedness by building a foundation of respect, empathy, and trust. School connectedness promotes student mental and physical health and helps build safe, healthy, thriving school communities.

WHAT ARE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?¹

Restorative practices are *strategies* that build and maintain meaningful relationships, and *processes* that repair those relationships when damaged.

In education, restorative practices are ways of thinking, being, and interacting that promote a safer, more supportive learning environment.

Rooted in Indigenous traditions, **restorative practices prioritize:**



trust



belonging



accountability



healing

Within schools, **restorative practices can be:**



informal
or formal



implemented in
a single building
or district-wide



used to build
skills, relationships,
and trust



used to address
conflict in a way
that repairs harm



Specific restorative practices:



Affective language focuses on understanding feelings and emotions, building trust, and fostering empathy.

- *“I feel concerned when only some students are participating, let’s work together to make sure everyone feels comfortable sharing.”*
- *“How did it feel when you successfully solved that problem?”*



Impromptu conversations between and among students and adults use affective language to build connections, address minor classroom disruptions and behaviors like disagreements between students, support problem solving, and build communication and social skills.



Proactive circles are structured discussions used to build connections and strengthen relationships. They are facilitated to create a safe, supportive, and equitable

space where all voices are heard and valued. These circles help individuals practice empathy, communication, and active listening.

Circles can be used in many ways, including building community, setting classroom expectations, delivering course content, celebrating success, or processing traumatic events.

WHY RESTORATIVE PRACTICES MATTER

Restorative practices have been shown to:



Reduce disparities in disciplinary actions.^{8,10,12}



Improve teachers’ perceptions that the school and classroom environment are supportive of teaching and learning.⁵



Increase students’ problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills.⁸



Improve overall perceptions of school climate.^{5,6,7}



Strengthen relationships between students and teachers.^{2,3,4}



Reduce disruptive behaviors, out-of-school suspensions, and discipline referrals.^{5,10,11}



Reduce student absenteeism.⁹



Formal conferences are structured conversations designed to address and resolve more serious conflicts, behavioral issues, or incidents of harm within the school community. Involving time and preparation, formal conferences bring together the individuals affected by an incident, such as the student(s) who caused harm, the student(s) who was harmed, school staff, and family members, to discuss how people were affected and collectively develop a plan to repair relationships. Rather than focusing solely on punishment, conferences emphasize accountability, repair, and community healing.

Exclusionary (punitive) approaches ask:

- *What rule was broken?*
- *Who did it?*
- *What punishment do they deserve?*

Restorative practices ask:

- *What happened?*
- *How were people affected?*
- *What needs to happen to make things right?*



Reentry circles are structured conversations designed to support and reintegrate students into the school community, often following a suspension or expulsion. People who might be able to provide support during the return to school are brought together with the student. Reentry circles might include teachers, other school staff family members, and other students. These circles aim to support a smooth transition back to school by rebuilding relationships and discussing ways to address challenges.



Restorative practices take time. Implementation may take 3–5 years before having an observable impact on student outcomes.⁸

RESOURCES

For more information on how restorative practices have been put into practice, see the example **Implementation Toolkits and Guides** below.

From **school districts and education non-profits**: *These resources describe ways to implement restorative practices in schools, including step-by-step instructions, timelines, lesson plans, and rubrics.*

From the **Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership**

<https://rjpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/Restorative-Justice-Implementation-Guide.pdf>

From **Chicago Public Schools**

https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B18g5_ywbF84_bk1nWU96OFdadE0/view?resourcekey=0-AttNLkuirAG7Rw2wvxz6Og

From **Oakland Public Schools**

<https://resources.fnalsite.net/images/v1692101675/ousdorg/mxzgprfq2ic2oq4ethyv/BTC-OUSD1-IG-08b-web.pdf>

From the **Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium**

<https://maec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/MAEC-RestorativePractices-2021.pdf>

From the **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning**: *This resource describes how restorative practices can promote positive social skills and support emotional development.*

https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/2021.10.12_Aligning-SEL-and-RP.pdf

From the **State Education Resource Center**: *This resource describes how restorative practices can be embedded within the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports framework.*

<https://www.pbis.serc.co/docs/PBIS%20and%20%20Restorative%20Practices%20final.pdf>

ENDNOTES

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11 Weber C, Vereenooghe L. Reducing conflicts in school environments using restorative practices: A systematic review. *Int J Educ Res Open*. 2020;1:100009.

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13 Anafara, VA, Evans KR, Lester JN. Restorative justice in education: what we know so far. *Middle Sch J*. 2013;44(5):57–63.



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Check out [additional resources](#) for getting started with restorative practices in schools.