



## RESEARCH REVIEW

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# RESTORATIVE PRACTICES BENEFIT BOTH TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

### ► THE STUDY

**Augustine, C.H., Engberg, J., Grimm, G.E., Lee, E., Wang, E.L., Christianson, K., & Joseph, A.A. (2018).**

*Can restorative practices improve school climate and curb suspensions? An evaluation of the impact of restorative practices in a mid-sized urban school district.* RAND Corporation. [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2840.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html)

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**A**s awareness has grown about the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline, especially on the Black and Brown students who are disproportionately suspended and expelled, so, too, has interest in alternative approaches to discipline. Restorative practices are becoming more common in schools across the U.S. and in other countries.

Restorative practices focus on building or repairing relationships to address or preempt conflict. They are based on the idea that when young people come to understand how they have caused harm and collaborate with others to find a solution for repairing the harm, they learn to behave differently while strengthening their connection to the community rather than becoming ostracized from it.

Quantitative research on restorative justice approaches is relatively new and still emerging. Understanding the findings that exist is important and timely, as schools grapple with how to address an increase in challenging classroom behaviors and dynamics while students readjust to in-person learning after more than a year of pandemic-driven stress and trauma.

Researchers at the RAND Corporation conducted one of the first randomized controlled trial studies of the impact of restorative practices on classroom and school climates and suspension rates by studying the implementation of a program in the Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Public Schools in years 2015-16 and 2016-17. The authors studied a program called the SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change program, which was part of an initiative called Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities.

The researchers found that implementation resulted in positive effects, including improvement in overall school climates (as rated by teachers), reduced suspension rates, and reduced disparities in suspension rates between African American and white students and between low- and higher-income students. Professional learning leaders can glean insights from this initiative, which included support and ongoing professional learning.



### BACKGROUND

Previous research has found that suspending students can hinder their learning and harm their chances of long-term success, despite its intent to refocus and redirect them away from problematic behavior.

In the short term, students serving suspension lose valuable learning time with teachers and peers, and those losses compound over time. In the longer term, students with a history of suspension are at higher risk of dropping out, even when the suspensions result from minor infractions like tardiness, absences, and disrespect.

These findings would be concerning on their own, but research has shown that African

American students are suspended at higher rates than white students, often receiving longer punishments for the same infractions.

The equity issues raised by these patterns are numerous, and scholars point to suspension as a key factor in the preschool-to-prison pipeline. Restorative practices have been highlighted as a possible alternative, one that might even improve student behavior overall, reducing the need for suspensions.

## THE PROGRAM

The research took place in the Pittsburgh Public School District, which implemented the Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities model to reduce disparities in suspension rates, address safety concerns in school buildings, and avoid the potential widespread negative impacts of exclusionary disciplinary practices.

The program is a whole-school model, meaning that all school staff learn how to implement the key features of the program, which include practices to establish or restore communication, build community, and facilitate students to either take responsibility for their actions or describe the impact of others' actions on them.

The program also emphasizes that, although those who commit harm are expected to apologize, do some type of service work, or even ultimately serve suspension if warranted, the community separates the “deed” from the “doer.” Students are held accountable for their actions and punished appropriately, but the school community does not break relationship with the student who committed the offense.

## Restorative practices have been highlighted as a possible alternative that might improve student behavior overall, reducing the need for suspensions.

The study compared schools involved in the two-year program with schools engaged in typical practices for the school without any intervention. Educators in treatment schools engaged in professional learning about and received support in implementing restorative practices throughout the two years of the initiative. This support included:

- Four days of professional learning provided by the organization that developed the program (two of which were optional);
- Accompanying books, videos, and other materials;
- Principal coaching sessions with an external program coach, conducted twice a year;
- Monthly meetings of each school's restorative leadership team with the external consultant;
- Monthly professional learning groups for all school staff; and
- Additional support as needed, such as supplementary materials and individualized coaching.

## METHODOLOGY

The researchers sought to answer these questions:

1. How was the restorative practices program implemented and what challenged or facilitated use of

restorative practices?

2. What were the impacts of the restorative practices program?
3. How likely is it that use of the restorative practices will be sustained?

Researchers looked at 44 schools, 22 treatment and 22 control. They collected implementation data over two years, including observations of trainings, surveys of treatment school staff, observations of restorative practices in four case study schools, and interviews of school, district, and staff from the external organization.

They focused their analyses on outcomes at the student level (suspensions, arrests, attendance, mobility, and achievement), the teacher level (composite teaching performance, value added, and student ratings of their teachers), and the school level (teacher ratings of teaching and learning conditions).

## FINDINGS

Almost all treatment-school staff developed some understanding of restorative practices over the two-year implementation, especially in the second year. Most reported that they often or always used restorative practices, including affective statements, proactive circles, impromptu conferences, or responsive circles.

Educators who participated in professional learning groups, received coaching from external consultants, or received support from the school leader were more likely to use the practices, as were those who reported that they understood the essential elements of restorative practices. The biggest reported barrier to implementation was time.

According to teachers, the program improved the overall school climate. Specifically, teachers in the treatment schools provided higher ratings of conduct management, teacher leadership, school leadership, and overall teaching and learning conditions in their schools than teachers in control schools. Educators in the treatment schools were also significantly more likely to feel they work in a safe environment and reported that they had stronger relationships with students because of restorative practices.

Students in treatment schools gave their schools lower school climate ratings than students in control schools, particularly on measures of teachers' classroom management. However, further analyses revealed that this finding was driven largely by classes where teachers reported very low implementation levels of restorative practice or simply didn't return their surveys.

Program implementation reduced both the number of days students were suspended and the number of suspensions. Days lost to suspension declined by 36% in the treatment schools, which meant more days for learning and less disruption to the planned schedule and cadence of schoolwork.

In addition, suspension rates of African American students and those from low-income families went down in treatment schools, shrinking the disparities in suspension rates between African American and white students and between low- and higher-income students. Suspension rates also decreased for female students, although not for male students.

The reduction in suspensions was not universal. Suspension rates remained steady for grades 6-8 and for students with individualized education plans. The rates of violence incidence and weapons violations did not change significantly.

Scores on standardized tests of math and reading did not improve over the two years of the initiative and declined

among some groups of students. As the researchers point out, the program was not designed to improve academic achievement. Furthermore, standardized test scores are distal outcomes relative to a school-level intervention such as the one tested here.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to suggesting that restorative practices can have beneficial impacts for teachers and students, the study offers insight into how to implement such practices effectively. The researchers made several recommendations for building capacity among educators for instituting and sustaining restorative practices:

1. Given the constraints on teachers' time, emphasize restorative practices that can be woven into the school day.
2. Ensure that school leaders understand and can model restorative practices by engaging them in mandatory professional learning, providing books and other materials, and coaching on restorative practices.
3. Establish a mechanism for school staff to meet at least once a month as a professional learning community on restorative practices.
4. Ensure that leaders at the district level can coordinate this work.
5. Set and update clear expectations regarding the use of restorative practices.
6. Implement data collection systems to collect accurate information on all types of behavioral incidents and remedies.

## IMPLICATIONS

Professional learning was a key component of the restorative practices intervention, and the study findings underscore much of what we know about effective professional learning: It must be embedded in the day-to-day work of educators, sustained over time,

and focused on developing knowledge and building skills and practices that address a particular problem of practice.

The program that was tested incorporated multiple sources of support — principal coaching, collaborative leadership teams, and individualized support as needed, which likely contributed to a strong initial implementation that improved over time.

At a time when issues of equity can seem abstract or theoretical, this implementation study offers evidence that there are specific practices, introduced and achieved through aligned professional learning, that can result in an improved culture of support for students.

The full published report includes detailed descriptions of the program and the findings — including the calculations about how much learning time can be gained from reclaiming the suspension days that could be used to advocate for investing in such a program — as well as helpful guidance for district and school leaders.

Several **Standards for Professional Learning** are evident in the findings of this research study, including the **Learning Designs standard**, which describes how professional learning that strengthens understanding and develops knowledge and practices (in this case restorative practices) leads to improved outcomes.

We also see many aspects of the **Implementation standard** in the research findings that speak to the impact of sustained, embedded, interconnected support structures for an initiative or change process.

As with many professional learning studies, educators reported that the biggest barrier to implementation was time, highlighting the need for policymakers and those leading implementation to attend to the **Resources standard** to help guide their decisions about allocations of funding, time, and human capital. ■