"Students do well if they can, not because they’re forced to." 1

In the last 10 to 15 years schools have begun to pursue restorative approaches to student conduct as a way to build safe and connected school communities. The restorative approach interprets disruptive behavior as an opportunity for deeper engagement and problem solving with the student. Rather than trying to control behavior through coercion, the restorative approach emphasizes collaboration with the student to help them:

- Understand and take responsibility for the impact of their actions on themselves and others
- Explore the precedent thinking, motivations, and unmet needs underlying their actions
- Recognize the importance of treating themselves and others with respect and consideration
- Repair any harm and make better choices moving forward.

Studies indicate that restorative approaches can lead to decreases in disruptive behavior in the classroom, decreases in incidents of harassment and bullying, lower rates of formal disciplinary measures such as suspension and expulsion, and increases in pro-social norms and academic performance. 2

1. Quinn, Kerri (2016). Personal conversation
While restorative discipline represents a tectonic paradigm shift away from punitive zero-tolerance discipline, schools can struggle with exactly how and where to implement restorative practices. As a result, the promises of the restorative approach can remain elusive.

In this article, I’ll explore some common challenges schools face as they seek to integrate restorative practices into the school social fabric. I’ll then offer some solutions and illustrate how one K-8 school exemplifies what’s not only possible, but achievable.

**Four Challenges**

“We had become familiar with restorative justice and we instinctively felt it was a promising approach but we had some concerns. The term ‘justice’ is a heavy word and still evokes feelings of enforcement. The more we brought experts in, the more discontent we became. We still couldn’t see how to develop and implement these practices on a functional level within the school.”

Anne White, Community Development Administrator at Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork, identifies four challenges facing schools as they seek to implement restorative practices. Though White (2017) refers to a Waldorf school, the issues she raises are common challenges for any private or public K-12 school.

**Challenge #1: Schools are not justice systems and students aren’t criminals.**

When any school pursues a restorative approach to discipline, they often don’t realize they are inheriting the paradigm and practices of restorative justice. Restorative justice was designed as an alternative to prosecution in the criminal justice system. Educators and administrators are now realizing that restorative justice models are not quite a fit in K-12 schools. There are reasons for this.

First, restorative justice is fundamentally reactive vs. proactive. Conventional restorative justice models (e.g. Peacemaking Circles and Community Group Conferencing) were designed for a one-time, after-the-fact encounter between those involved in an incident of crime. They were not designed to address patterns of behavior, or provide a continuous engagement on a day-to-day basis to help students learn about their


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own thinking, choices, and emotions. As a result, the pedagogical and social-emotional developmental value of restorative interaction and communication is not developed.

Second, restorative justice and/or discipline can still be coercive and “feel like punishment.” This happens when too much emphasis is placed on what a student did, and what he/she needs to do to “make things right.” Reparative actions such as after-school study halls, school community service, or making restitution/amends can become implicitly predetermined sanctions set forth by the school and/or facilitators. There is also an inherent risk of subjecting students to the biases of individuals in power.

The interaction and discussion with the student about why they did what they did is more important than the outcome called “the reparative contract.”

Challenge #2: Training

Though this is changing, the majority of trainings conducted for schools by restorative justice programs still provide only rudimentary restorative justice conference facilitation skills and scripts designed to resolve criminal violations. Again, the central focus is on impact and repair.

Basic training does not equip educators with the nuanced interaction and communication skills (e.g. language, listening skills, and trauma-responsive communication) to engage with challenging behavior that (a) happens in the moment, (b) is consistently happening, and (c) is not serious enough to warrant a “formal discipline” response.

While the very basic “4 Step” restorative justice process is important to learn and understand, restorative interaction is more flexible. It’s designed to address the unique and often subtle social-emotional developmental needs of students that emerge on a day-to-day basis and in-the-moment conflicts or disruptions.

Challenge #3: Inconsistency and Disorganization

Among many reasons why schools struggle to implement restorative practices in a consistent and meaningful way is that they don’t take a systematic “whole-school” approach. Most schools attempt to add various restorative practices to their existing discipline methods. This results in a superficial and inconsistent implementation of restorative practices. Restorative communication is not embedded in the day-to-day conversations about conflict.

There are several limitations with this patchwork approach.

- The burden is left to individual teachers to “do restorative justice” in their classrooms.
- The school’s application of the restorative response to misconduct is inconsistent, reactive vs. proactive, formulaic/static, and superficial.
• The basic skills of restorative justice taught to teachers by outside consultants fade over time.

• The nuances of restorative interaction (e.g., languaging, attachment style response, trauma-responsive) are not developed, maintained, refined, or advanced.

• There is no core group charged with ensuring timely, consistent, organized, and effective restorative resolutions to conflict, incidents, or patterns of misconduct.

One of the main reasons why restorative justice has been so successful in the courts is because of programs. Programs receive cases, document, coordinate, administer, monitor, and facilitate restorative encounters between offenders, victims, and others impacted by a violation. A school-based program can provide the same—a highly organized system of processing and tracking incidents, paying particular attention to an individual student’s social-emotional development.

Challenge #4: It’s not just about the students.

“We couldn’t see how these methods could become ways of responding not only to incongruent behavior in students, but the conflict happening between our adults.”4

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When this happens they miss out on the benefits of resolving conflict and long-standing issues between adults (faculty and parents) in a restorative way.

Staff (and boards) don’t develop restorative communication habits between themselves or with parents. Parents and students see and sense this inconsistency. It’s often the case that tensions among staff impact the school’s professional culture and climate.

In order for a school to become culturally restorative, disagreements between adults as well as challenging behavior with students need to be embraced as opportunities to more deeply connect. It’s about the adults developing the discipline of engagement and connection with each other in the service of community well-being. This simple,


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but intentional, commitment creates a professional climate of safety and trust that permeates the entire school community.

**Whole-School Solution: 4 Pillars of a Restorative School Culture**

A whole-school approach consists of: Policy, Program, Practices, and Pedagogy.

**Restorative Policy**

“When a student falls short of a behavioral expectation, we believe the correct response from us is to help them learn and grow from the incident. For this reason, we embrace a restorative approach to student conduct.

“When an incident happens that disrupts the classroom or school social environment, our policy is to speak with everyone who was involved or impacted, hear their perspective, understand why it happened, determine what people need to resolve the incident (including repair), and co-create an agreement to nurture constructive changes. This includes students, parents, faculty, and administration” - From Waldorf School on the Roaring Fork Behavioral Policy. (2017)

Even though schools are implementing restorative practices, their conduct polices often remain sanction-oriented and deficit-focused. Notice that the above statement articulates a positive response to an incident rather than a coercive one. In doing so, it establishes a positive communication norm based on engagement.

It’s been my experience that in the desire to embrace restorative practices, school conduct policies are not as specific as they need to be in terms of explaining exactly how incidents are actually processed, and how behavior is held accountable. Parents need this specificity.

The more specific the policy is in explaining how the school responds, the less confusion and anxiety parents will have, and the less stressful it will be for school faculty and administrators.

A behavioral policy should shine a light on what’s possible. It should promote positive behavioral norms and clear expectations for all community members—not just students. When a policy sets forth positive behaviors and positive responses that the whole community can aspire to, it becomes a teaching reference rather than a code of discipline.

When parents, teachers, and staff are aspiring to achieve the same positive norms as students, and responding to incidents among themselves in a restorative manner, students witness and experience coherency, consistency, and continuity. Consistency reduces confusion and anxiety.
RESTORATIVE SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

A policy should lay out in a precise manner the processes, methods, and practices for working through misconduct and conflict in a way that restores relationships and membership.

While most policies have a section on bullying, the more specific and clear a policy is with regard to distinguishing bullying behavior, and exactly how the school responds to incidents, the more trust parents place in the administration.

The restorative response to incidents of bullying requires equal parts accountability for the aggressor, and support for the student targeted. This is by far the best prevention.

**Restorative Program**

A school-based program provides the organizational structure needed to implement and sustain consistently effective restorative responses to conflict, misconduct, and challenging behavior—both students and adults. If a school commits to implementing school-based programs throughout all its divisions, the result is consistency in coordination, quality of practice, and data-tracking.

A high-functioning program has two essential components:

1. A Restorative Council
2. Program Documentation and Data Tracking

A whole-school program is not designed to be complicated, time-consuming, or administratively burdensome. Quite the opposite. Once the program is in place and people understand how it works, the processing and resolution of incidents and conflict will happen in an organized, efficient, expedient, and predictable way.

**Restorative Council ("RC")**—The (3-5) member Council meets weekly (usually for 60 minutes). Schools typically already have a group in place that addresses learning and behavior such as a Student Support Executive Group (SSEG), Social Health Group (SHG), Discipline Group (DG), or Social Inclusion Group (SIG). The RC can draw from the experience and wisdom of these groups, doing so by integrating their members into the RC under the rubric of restorative discipline.

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Specifically, a Restorative Council is charged with several important responsibilities.

1. Ensuring the integrity of the Restorative Approach to conflict and misconduct.
2. Receiving and reviewing incident reports.
3. Conducting conversations/interviews with students, faculty, and/or parents when necessary.
4. Identifying unmet needs and underlying issues in a student’s life that may be compelling the disruptive behavior.
5. Determining the most effective and appropriate restorative response to meet those needs as articulated in the Policy.
6. Working closely with the school’s Counselor or Care Group to support any existing SEL, MTSS, PBIS, and RTI plans.
7. Facilitating restorative conferences when necessary.
8. Monitoring student progress and Restorative Agreements.
9. Eventually conducting ongoing in-school training of faculty in restorative communication.

**Restorative Practices**

In the past five years there has been an extraordinary evolution in school-based restorative practices. While the basic 4 Step Restorative Process inherited from restorative justice remains the core, advancements in interpersonal neurobiology, neuroscience of communication, trauma-awareness, and trauma-responsiveness are revealing the transformative power of restorative language, community building circles, communication, and interaction.

With trauma, there are ways of communicating restoratively that can effectively intervene in the immediate experience of traumatic stress, anxiety, agitation, and/or withdrawal to help co-regulate emotions and nervous system function. When these ways and practices are supported by a whole-school program, trauma recovery becomes part of the restorative plan for any student and/or faculty member. Most schools are striving to become trauma-informed. The next evolutionary step is to become trauma-responsive, and restorative communication is the way to accomplish this.

Regardless of the specific practice, all restorative practices are about restorative communication. Whether it’s a restorative conduct policy; a classroom teaching circle; a check-in circle; class or faculty respect agreement; a one-on-one restorative conversation with a student, colleague, or parent; or a more
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formal restorative group conference circle, all rely upon a very specific type of communication and interaction to accomplish equally specific goals.

Generally speaking, all restorative communication has five distinct goals:

1. Establish connection with empathy to build trust.
2. Create a safe dialogue space for expressing and acknowledging feelings and perspectives.
3. Facilitate a shared understanding of what has happened, or is happening.
4. Discover the underlying thinking, reasons, issues, and potential unmet needs compelling the challenging behavior/incident.
5. Co-create a plan of action with the student (or others) to meet those needs with a measurable agreement to follow through and affect change.

Restorative Pedagogy

What and how does restoration teach? The short answer is that it teaches us how to be in relationship with each other when there is conflict, disagreement, destructive interaction, or trauma. As a process it organizes a conversation in such a way that we can talk openly about what’s happening, how we feel, what we need. It requires us to put a plan in place to meet those needs. It shows us how accountability and empathy can work together.

Last year an 8th grade teacher where we implemented the whole-school approach shared with me how she used the restorative process to guide a class discussion about the current crisis of immigration. After taking her class through the process over several days, she asked her class “What does restoration look like?” Her students created a restorative agreement that included numerous restorative actions. First on that list was “We need to stop calling them immigrants, and start referring to them as refugees.”

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