

Shifting School Climate & Culture:

A restorative practices resource guide

Building Positive Relationships



Before becoming involved in restorative practices at school, a western New York teen had admitted that his first reaction to conflict with people sometimes focused more on violence than on finding solutions or common ground.

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“I would just think about beating them up, how I could hurt them,” he said, adding that the reaction is not unusual in his community.

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“Now I just walk away,” he said. The shift happened after the high school student participated in restorative practice activities at Randolph Academy Union Free School District.

“He’s learned empathy,” the teen’s teacher explained before turning to

the student and saying, “That’s been one of the outcomes— learning how your actions can impact other people when you hear from the people who are affected.”

Such shifts in attitudes are occurring throughout countless schools as they incorporate restorative practices and these shifts are, in turn, having significant positive impacts on school climate and culture.

What are restorative practices?

Restorative practices are characterized by principles that emphasize the importance of positive relationships as central to building community and use processes that restore relationships when harm has occurred. This is a proactive approach versus reacting to conflict in what may be considered more “traditional” punitive ways.

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According to the Fix School Discipline Toolkit for Educators, “The use of restorative justice and restorative practices in schools offers a respectful and equitable approach to discipline, as well as a proactive strategy to create a connected, inclusive school culture. Inspired by indigenous values, restorative justice is a philosophy and theory of justice that emphasizes bringing together everyone affected by wrongdoing to address needs and responsibilities, and to heal the harm to

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relationships as much as possible. This philosophy is being applied in many contexts, including schools, families, workplaces and the justice system.”

“Restorative practices are used to build a sense of school community and prevent conflict by creating positive relationships through the use of regular ‘restorative circles,’ where students and educators work together to set academic goals and develop core values for the classroom community.”

Building relationships

Regularly occurring proactive circles (small groups of pupils) can be used for informal conversions and check-ins, laying a foundation of trust, community-building and relationship-building among students and educators. Circles can also feature restorative conversations, which allow educators to demonstrate empathy and teach pupils ways to resolve conflict—while also giving students a voice in the process. These circles are often used to repair harm and rebuild relationships after incidents or infractions. Participants are given the opportunity to discuss what happened, who was impacted and how, along with ways to set things right, move forward and ensure the same thing doesn’t happen again.



“Restorative practices teach students social-emotional skills, they teach empathy and how to fix things far more than just sending a student off into suspension, which really doesn’t change anything,” commented Randolph Academy Superintendent Lori DeCarlo.

Other restorative practices used in schools may include peer mediation, peer juries and additional types of conflict resolution.

As a whole, the focus on proactively improving relationships among students and staff builds community, and this goes a long way toward improving school climate and culture.

Resources

Members of the Educational Conference Board applaud your interest in restorative practices and encourage you to explore how the practices can become part of your district’s broader approach to addressing students’ increasingly complex social, emotional and mental health needs. Successfully implementing restorative practices requires a long-term commitment, continuous training and buy-in from all stakeholders. The resources included in this guide, which represent just a fraction of those available, will provide good background information to get you started.



Restorative practices: working when other approaches haven’t

You might say if restorative practices can work at Randolph Academy Union Free School District, they’re likely to work in most other districts if implemented properly.

Randolph is a “special act district” in western New York. Such districts were created by special acts of the state legislature to help children who cannot be educated in their local

school districts. These children have endured neglect, abuse or serious family issues and/or have been diagnosed with autism, emotional/behavioral issues, substance abuse issues, etc. They are among the most vulnerable and imperiled children in the state—ones who are often left behind.

“This population has been suspended and put on home instruction so many times before they get to us, they’ve often given up any hope or faith in anything to do with school,” said Randolph Academy Principal John Kwietniewski.

Tyler (not his real name) is just one example. He was suspended multiple times from his

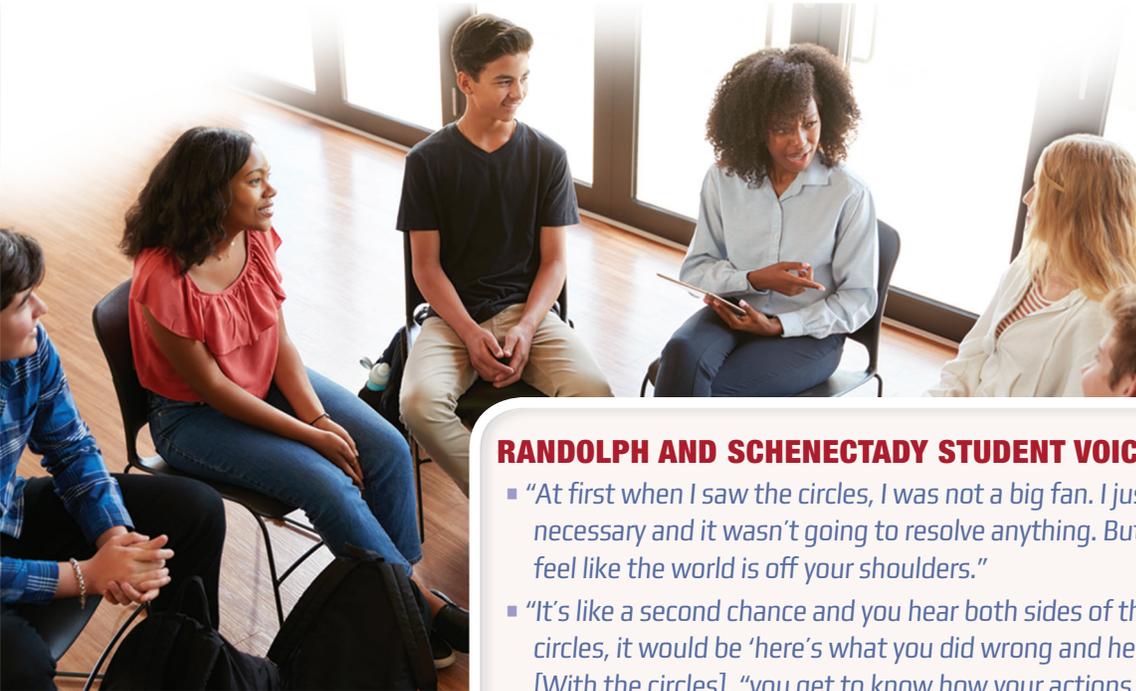
home school district. With the restorative processes at Randolph, though, he found success because he built relationships and was given opportunities to consider his actions in the broader context of a community.

“Superintendents’ hearings and long-term suspensions don’t offer kids the opportunity to learn from mistakes and make things right,” said Randolph Superintendent Lori DeCarlo. “In any other school, Tyler probably wouldn’t be back to school; he would have lost a whole year of learning. Today, he’s passing all of his classes and he’s a positive leader in the school. The restorative practices have created a profound turning point for the better in him

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Resources

- **Fix School Discipline Toolkit for Educators** – guidance on eliminating harsh discipline practices that push students out of school and, instead, implementing inclusive policies that hold students accountable and improve school climate and safety. <https://bit.ly/2LiLNiF>
- **Restorative Practices: Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools** – easy-to-understand information about restorative practices, as well as models, frameworks and action steps for implementing those practices in schools. <https://bit.ly/2d8cBMA>
- **Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide for Schools** – explains restorative justice, looks at challenges to implementation and provides approaches to using restorative justice in school districts. <https://bit.ly/2j8MnwO>
- **School-Wide Restorative Practices: Step by Step** – gives a practical approach to integrating restorative practices in schools, recognizing that successful initiatives take at least three to five years to implement. Monthly and yearly activities, benchmarks, challenges, stakeholder involvement and buy-in are all covered. <https://bit.ly/2EpNkiB>
- **Resources from the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD)** – information for districts seeking to introduce restorative practices; numerous resources are available, including a whole-district implementation guide, outreach materials, circle scripts and more. <https://bit.ly/2GTWJ0F>
- **Oakland Unified School District's restorative justice program** – three links include a landing page for information on the district's restorative justice program, resources, (including a variety of useful templates for conducting circles) and a restorative justice implementation guide. <https://bit.ly/2IXxUnY> and <https://bit.ly/2ZQlkw9> and <https://bit.ly/2kk8e7F>
- **Integrating Bullying Prevention and Restorative Practices in Schools: Considerations for Practitioners and Policymakers from the Center for Safe Schools, Clemson Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, Highmark Foundation** – addresses the integration of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) and restorative practices in schools. <https://bit.ly/2Vdk0cJ>



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and his life. I know what traditional discipline would have done—it would be pushing him one step closer to dropping out of high school.”

Tyler’s story reflects the impressive results experienced throughout Randolph Academy—for example, decreases in discipline referrals and improvements in school climate. “The biggest change we’ve seen is that the restorative approaches have won credibility with students and staff alike and it’s a go-to strategy that students ask for. They’ll go to the principal or teacher to say a circle is needed,” DeCarlo commented. “It’s won the confidence of our teachers because of the good results, especially the effectiveness of circles.”

RANDOLPH AND SCHENECTADY STUDENT VOICES

- *“At first when I saw the circles, I was not a big fan. I just didn’t think it was necessary and it wasn’t going to resolve anything. But they proved me wrong. You feel like the world is off your shoulders.”*
- *“It’s like a second chance and you hear both sides of the situation. Before using circles, it would be ‘here’s what you did wrong and here’s your consequence.’ [With the circles], ‘you get to know how your actions affected other people.’”*
- *“Before, the issues kept carrying on because the problem wasn’t ever really resolved.”*
- *[In the circles], “I’m surrounded by people who listen to what I have to say.”*

Schenectady City School District has experienced similar successes with its restorative practices. For example, the district uses circles in a variety of ways—from addressing attendance issues to using the process as part of class discussions. Basically, restorative practices have become part of the district culture, even to the extent that students are trained to facilitate circles on their own.

“We discuss topics from race to curriculum to restoring justice,” explained Philip Weinman, engagement supervisor. “We try to give

students voice and give them opportunities to speak their truth and be heard in a safe space.”

This has worked particularly well at Schenectady High School. “There have been a multitude of students whose lives have been saved, either in the process of facilitating the circles or participating in the circle process,” Weinman commented. “Many of these impacted students are now going to college, whereas five months earlier, they could have been high school dropouts.”





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- **Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community** by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis – step-by-step instructions for planning, facilitating and implementing circles for a variety of purposes; also provides more than 100 lesson plans. <https://bit.ly/1Mx2D2z>
- **Heart of Hope: A Guide for Using Peacemaking Circles to Develop Emotional Literacy, Promote Healing & Build Healthy Relationships** by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis. Provides formats for conducting effective circles around developing emotional literacy and building healthy relationships. <https://bit.ly/2WmecFF>
- **How Restorative Justice Helps Students Learn** – Edutopia article. <https://edut.to/2H0kHsk>
- **American Educator: Seeding change in School Discipline, The Move from Zero Tolerance to Support** – covers a variety of topics related to alternative school discipline models, including restorative practices. <https://bit.ly/2ZVrY4j>
- **PBS NewsHour: Colorado School Replaces Punishment with Talking Circles** – highlights restorative justice initiative at Hinkley High School in Aurora, Colorado. <https://bit.ly/2UYWvKz>
- **The Washington Post: This school once had a reputation for violence. Here's how that changed** – further coverage about Hinkley High School's restorative justice program. <https://wapo.st/2H0tVvt>
- **Restorative Justice in a Denver, Colorado School** by researchers Dr. Tom Cavanagh, Dr. Patricia Vigil and Estrellita Garcia. <https://bit.ly/2PTdY6B>
- **Implementing restorative justice in schools: Lessons learned from restorative justice practitioners in four Brooklyn schools** <https://bit.ly/2YaLnMZ>
- **Restorative Justice in Oakland Schools: Implementation and Impacts** <https://bit.ly/2xaZvK3>
- **Rand Corporation: Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?** <https://bit.ly/2SzMtg>
- **Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A research review** <https://bit.ly/2rdwfgY>
- **Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Practitioners' perspectives** <https://bit.ly/2lYe5wG>

A glimpse into the circle process

Steeped in Native American cultures, “circles” are used to connect people, build relationships and repair harm. They are one of the more visible and recognizable tools in restorative practices. While circles can vary, some of the common characteristics are:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants sit in a circle facing one another with no barriers/obstacles between them.
- A talking piece, which can be any object, is passed around and the person holding it has the opportunity to speak, while others in the group listen.
- A leader (or “keeper”) guides the discussion through questions and prompts and participants respond during “rounds.” The keeper also directs the movement of the talking piece.
- An opening to begin the circle process and a closing to end the process.

Educators may use circles to simply check in with students and create a supportive atmosphere for learning. In other cases, circles are used to help youth take responsibility for actions that may have harmed others.

“For many students who are participating in circles, it may be the first time that day that their voice has been heard,” said Schenectady City School District Engagement Supervisor Philip Weinman.

And giving students a voice means they also have the power to choose positive paths for themselves.

Please check out the resources included in this guide to find out about best practices for conducting circles.

Books available through online retailers:

- **The Restorative Practices Handbook for Teachers, Disciplinarians and Administrators: Building a Culture of Community in Schools.** International Institute for Restorative Practices by Bob Costello, Joshua Wachtel and Ted Wachtel.
- **The Little Book of Circle Processes: A New/Old Approach to Peacemaking** by Kay Pranis.
- **The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated (Justice and Peacebuilding)** by Howard Zehr.
- **The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools: Teaching Responsibility; Creating Caring Climates** by Lorraine Stutzman Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet.
- **The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education: Fostering Responsibility, Healing, and Hope in Schools** by Katherine Evans and Dorothy Vaadering.

