

# Restorative practices found to be effective alternative to zero tolerance in schools

December 13 2011

---

Restorative practices appear to be an effective alternative to exclusionary and punitive zero-tolerance behavior policies mandated in many schools today.

So reports Laura Mirsky in an article in the December 2011 issue of *The [Prevention Researcher](#)*, a quarterly journal that focuses on successful [adolescent development](#) and serves professionals who work with young people.

Mirsky interviewed educators and students at schools using restorative practices. She concludes that "although formal research is just beginning in this area, early indications and anecdotal evidence suggest that restorative practices, by intentionally promoting [open communication](#), enhance relationships and thereby improve school climate, [discipline](#) and safety."

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in Bethlehem, PA has gathered data—mainly discipline statistics—from approximately 40 schools since 1999 to evaluate the effects of restorative practices.

"The data indicate that restorative practice implementation increased school safety and decreased discipline problems," Mirsky writes.

At West Philadelphia High School, for example, which received its first formal training in restorative practices in 2008, suspensions decreased by half from April to December of that year. A year later the school was

removed from Pennsylvania's persistently dangerous schools list, where it had been for six years.

Mirsky, assistant director of communications and technology for IIRP, says the restorative approach engages students in processes where they can take responsibility for their behavior. It also includes proactive ways for them to build relationships and community.

She discusses 11 elements used to change the learning climate in schools. Seven of these are school-wide and used by all staff members who come in contact with children. One—affective statements—underpins all other elements. Affective statements are "personal expressions of feelings in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others."

"Understanding and using affective statements can help foster an immediate change in the dynamic between teacher and student," says Mirsky. "When teachers tell students how they feel, they humanize themselves to students, who often perceive teachers as distinct from themselves."

In the fall of 2010, City Springs Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland began concentrating wholeheartedly on affective statements and the 10 other elements of whole-school change. The number of suspensions at City Springs declined from 86 in 2008-2009 to nine in 2010-2011.

While affective statements are the most informal restorative practice, at the other end of the 11-step continuum is the most formal one: the restorative conference. This is a structured protocol used in response to serious incidents. All persons involved come together to explore what happened, who was affected, and what needs to be done to make things right. The conference is run by a trained facilitator who leads participants through a series of scripted questions to think about the

incident, who it affected and how, and how they can repair the situation.

Mirsky describes a restorative conference held at Kosciusko Middle School in Detroit's Hamtramck School District. Two girls had written a "hit list" naming 25 fellow students and signing their names. The situation upset the entire school. A restorative conference was held with the girls, all of the students on the list, and everyone's parents, along with teachers, administrators and translators in four languages. Everyone spoke. At the end, all agreed that the two girls, who were remorseful, would not be expelled. They would, however, not be allowed to attend the eighth-grade trip and would work in the school office all summer to make amends.

"In the center of the restorative practices continuum—and fundamental to it—are circles," says Mirsky. One person speaks at a time. Everyone has a chance to speak.

"Circles change the classroom dynamic," she says. "Students who might normally behave obstructively are integrated into the classroom when given a forum to be heard, and assertive students who might dominate discussion can no longer do so."

Said one student at Hamtramck High [School](#), "Before we had circles we didn't feel like our voices mattered. Now the violence and fighting have stopped. Circles make you feel safe. We all come together. A lot of us want to change the world."

**More information:** Mirsky's paper is titled "Restorative Practices: Giving Everyone a Voice to Create Safer, Saner School Communities."

Provided by Dick Jones Communications

Citation: Restorative practices found to be effective alternative to zero tolerance in schools (2011, December 13) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-effective-alternative-tolerance-schools.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.