

Executive Summary

From “Restorative Justice in Schools Evaluation Report – 2012”

A report to Resolutions Northwest by Portland State University Center for Student Success

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the study of the effectiveness of the Restorative Justice program currently implemented in five Portland area K-12 public schools. The evaluation was conducted in five of the eight schools currently participating in the Restorative Justice project. Included in this study are one elementary school, two middle schools and two high schools, and these schools represent three school districts. These schools include the following: Rigler Elementary School (Portland Public School District), Parkrose Middle School (Parkrose School District), Floyd Light Middle School (David Douglas School District), Grant High School (Portland Public School District), and David Douglas High School (David Douglas School District).

The Restorative Justice alternative discipline model is primarily focused on reducing the number of student exclusions from school and decreasing student involvement with the police and the juvenile justice system. Key principles of the program include an emphasis on healing over punishment, inclusion not exclusion, and individual accountability. Community involvement and support for the program are critical to accomplishment of its overall objectives.

Given that research indicates that students who have been excluded from school are at greater risk of being referred to the juvenile justice system, and students of color are disproportionately suspended or expelled from schools, the Restorative Justice model seeks to break this cycle by offering alternative disciplinary strategies that hold youth accountable for their behavior while maintaining their connection to and support from the school community. (See page 2 of the full report for research citations)

This qualitative study of the program relies primarily on the collection of focus group data from each school’s administrators, selected teachers, and selected students. This research was designed to capture the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of those most directly affected by the Restorative Justice program currently in place in the five schools. It is important to note that the opinions obtained through focus group research do not necessarily reflect and represent the opinions of all students or of all staff involved in the Restorative Justice project. This research strategy presents findings that represent opinions expressed with sufficient frequency to warrant consideration and possibly further study.

Summary of Findings

- In schools that have had longer-term opportunities to incorporate Restorative Justice principles and practices, the program is more firmly embedded into the school’s overall structure. Additionally, these schools typically have the additional resource of a full-time Restorative Justice specialist. This RJ trained individual has in all instances had a significant impact on student attitudes and consequently on their behaviors.

Administrators and administrative support staff in these schools appear to have a deeper understanding of the program’s philosophy, principles and potential results and are committed to integrating RJ options into the school’s disciplinary responses. Key to this level of implementation are the following: length of time participating, resource allocation, and level of staff understanding.

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- Relationships and communication between school staff and families are significantly enhanced through the use of restorative principles to respond to disciplinary issues.*

Discipline models that rely solely on a punitive system of suspensions and expulsions do not in the long-term promote building positive relationships with students and their families.

- School climate is positively impacted through implementation of restorative principles that are used in lieu of punitive responses. RJ interventions that focus on recognition of the harm that has been done, the impact of one's actions on others, and the development of empathy for others all contribute to student growth and development. These lessons combine with the development of problem-solving skills to contribute in numerous ways to all aspects of student's lives both now and in the future.
- The allocation of time for Restorative Justice program implementation is critical to successful implementation. This time must be directed toward administrator and teacher professional development in RJ, enhancing student and parent understanding of RJ and its purpose and principles, developing community understanding, and building community support for the program.

It is clear that all adults working in the school must clearly understand the program's purpose for successful implementation that results in systemic change.

- By allowing students more active voice in problem-solving situations, one result is that the authority structure currently in place in the school setting will be impacted. The participatory nature of the restorative process for students needs to be understood and accepted by school staff.
- Issues related to equity and discipline must be carefully studied and appropriate responses developed. Assumptions contributing to this must be studied, clarified and appropriately addressed (See page 34 of the full report for elaboration).
- School staffing resources are a continual challenge for schools and districts, and Restorative Justice staffing should not supplant staffing for the school's educational program
- In order for the Restorative Justice program to have long-term viability in a school, it must be embedded systemically and pervasively into the attitudes, systems and structures in place across the school. It also must involve the school's community in the program to ensure long-term success.

This study of the Restorative Justice program in these five schools shows that given the appropriate resources, the program holds promise as an alternative disciplinary model. With the intent of reducing suspensions and expulsions, RJ provides a seemingly fair and reasonably effective disciplinary alternative. Given that educators come to their work with the objective of keeping students in school and contributing to their educational success, an alternative to exclusion from schools is imperative. The lessons that students learn as a result of participation in the restorative process will contribute to their overall growth and development as successful citizens now and in the future.

** The opportunity for schools to participate in the parent/teacher restorative listening dialogue was made possible through the partnership between RNW and the Portland Parent Union. The Portland Parent Union is a parent advocacy organization whose goal is to give parents an equal voice in their children's education and to empower them to be powerful advocates for their children and each other.*

9/14/12