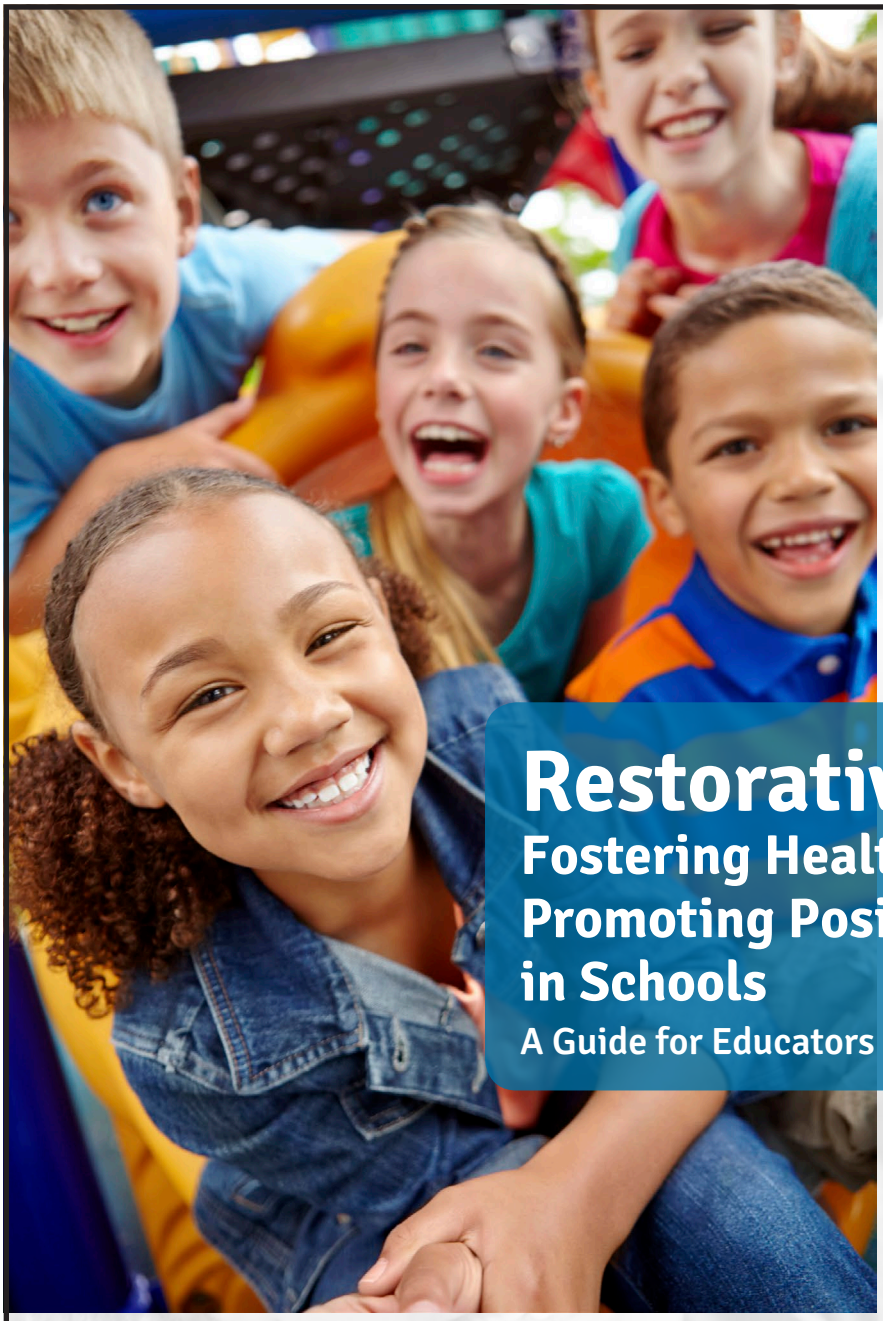

Restorative Practices:
Fostering Healthy Relationships & Promoting Positive Discipline in Schools
A Guide for Educators

MARCH 2014

Advancement Project

aft — A Union of Professionals

nea National Education Association — Great Public Schools for Every Student

National Opportunity to Learn Campaign

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Restorative Practices Working Group

Cheryl Anderson
Paraprofessional, Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland

Makeba Sumner Barnes
AFT Grant Consultant, Maryland

Catherine Beane
Sr. Policy Analyst, Human & Civil Rights Department, National Education Association

Dr. Joseph Bishop
Policy Director, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign

Elizabeth Davis
President, Washington Teachers Union, Washington, DC

Peter Fishkind
AFT Grant Intern, Washington, DC

Georgene Fountain
Elementary Music Teacher, Montgomery County, Maryland

Kevin Gilbert
Executive Committee, National Education Association, Mississippi

Matthew Guldin
Former Dean of Students, Teachers Unite and the Dignity in Schools Campaign, New York

Leah Kang
Staff Attorney, Advancement Project

Harry Lawson
Associate Director, Human & Civil Rights Department, National Education Association

Dr. Khalid Mumin
Superintendent, Caroline County, Maryland

Dwanna Nicole
Policy Advocate, Advancement Project

Dionna Ricks
Elementary Instructional Facilitator, Department of Special Education and Student Services, Howard County, Maryland

Jocelyn Rousey
Communications Coordinator, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign

Robert Spicer
Culture and Climate Specialist, Chicago Public Schools, Illinois

Patrick St. John
Creative & Online Communications Director, National Opportunity to Learn Campaign

Dr. Lisa Thomas
Senior Policy Analyst, American Federation of Teachers, Washington, DC

Geralda Thompson
Teacher, Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland

Stanley Truman
Pupil Personnel Worker & Maryland State Discipline Committee, Montgomery County, Maryland

I. Background

Humans are born to learn, but we don't learn in isolation. We learn based on positive relationships and interactions with peers and in environments like schools that foster opportunities for students and staff to learn and grow together.[1] Educators recognize this reality and keep the social and emotional health of their students a deliberate and central focus of learning. As educators partner with districts to move away from zero tolerance discipline policies and ramp up efforts to strengthen safe and supportive schools, address conflict, improve school climate, and build a positive school culture that students are connected to, many campuses are looking to implement alternative, restorative approaches.

There remains confusion in the education field over what restorative practices are and how they can help create safe learning environments through community building and redressing damage.[2] This toolkit was developed to illustrate how restorative strategies can be seamlessly integrated into the classroom, curriculum, and culture of schools. It defines what restorative practices are, explains why they are a transformational tool for fostering healthy relationships in schools and shows how they can be useful processes for students, educators, and learning communities.

This toolkit is intended for all educators who support the growth and health of students in schools. It is an introduction for those new to the concepts and will help support and enhance the work of teachers already implementing these practices in their classrooms. The toolkit includes digestible models, frameworks, and action steps for school-wide implementation, accompanied by guiding questions to support reflection for practitioners looking to make restorative methods part of the fabric of daily life in schools. It also recognizes the significant role all education professionals play in maintaining a school community that models respectful, trusting, and caring relationships.

II. What Are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practices are processes that proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.[3] Restorative practices are increasingly being applied in individual schools and school districts to address youth behavior, rule violations, and to improve school climate and culture.[4] Restorative practices can improve relationships between students, between students and educators, and even between educators, whose behavior often serves as a role model for students. They allow each member of the school community to develop and implement a school's adopted core values.

Restorative practices allow individuals who may have committed harm to take full responsibility for their behavior by addressing the individual(s) affected by the behavior. Taking responsibility requires understanding how the behavior affected others, acknowledging that the behavior was harmful to others, taking action to repair the harm, and making changes necessary to avoid such behavior in the future.

> "While conflicts of which I've been part often began with raised voices and closed ears, through restorative approaches they have ended in smiles, handshakes, and hugs. This seems ultimately more healthful for interpersonal relationships and overall school culture than traditional, reactionary disciplinary measures."
>
> **— Allison, High School Math Teacher**

Restorative practices also represent a mindset that can help guide adult and youth behavior and relationship management in schools, not another program. They are

not intended to replace current initiatives and evidence-based programs like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or social and emotional learning models that assist in building a foundation and culture of caring. Programs and initiatives like PBIS complement restorative practices.[5] Restorative practices work when they are implemented school wide and integrated into the fabric of the school community. When the whole school is infused with restorative strategies, it becomes easier to address issues faster and respond in a thoughtful way because the caring and supportive culture is already present.[6]

> "Instead of learning from our behavior, schools just force us out without real conversations and interventions. Suspensions don't work, summonses don't work, arrests don't work. Keep us in the classroom, keep us accountable, and build relationships. That works."
>
> **— Savannah, age 15**

Types of Restorative Practices

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is an evidence-based practice effectively used to reduce suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary referrals. Restorative justice focuses on righting a wrong committed and repairing harm done. The goal is to place value on relationships and focus on repairing relationships that have been injured. The victim and the wrongdoer have the opportunity to share with one another how they were harmed, as victims, or how they will work to resolve the harm caused, as wrongdoers.

Community conferencing

Community conferencing is a practice that provides students and educators with effective ways to prevent and respond to school conflict.[7] Community conferencing involves the participation of each person affected by the behavior and allows all stakeholders to contribute to the conflict resolution process.

Community service

Community service allows for individuals to restore a harm they may have committed to the school community by providing a meaningful service that contributes to their individual improvement.

Peer juries

Peer juries allow students, who have broken a school rule, and trained student jurors to collectively discuss why the rule was broken, who was affected, and how the referred student can repair the harm caused.[8]

Circle process

A circle is a versatile restorative practice that can be used proactively, to develop relationships and build community, or reactively, to respond to wrongdoing, conflicts, and problems. Circles can be used as a tool to teach social skills such as listening, respect, and problem solving. Circles provide people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in a safe atmosphere and allow educators and students to be heard and offer their own perspectives.[9] Circles can also be used to celebrate students, begin and end the day, and discuss difficult issues.[10]

Preventative and post-conflict resolution programs

Conflict resolution programs provide students with problem-solving and self-control skills.[11] These programs teach young people how to manage potential conflict, defuse situations, assuage hurt feelings, and reduce any inclination to retaliate after a conflict. Conflict resolution programs walk students through their emotions in the presence of one another and guide them through a team process of addressing the issues that gave rise to the conflict in the first instance. Because conflict resolution addresses and works to resolve the root causes of conflict, it helps prevent future incidents from occurring.

Peer mediation

One method of resolving conflict with student voice is through peer mediation. "Peer mediation is a demonstrably effective youth leadership model" that trains students to help other students resolve differences.[12] "Peer mediation recognizes that students can utilize conflict resolution practices and social skills to play a leadership role in increasing peace and reducing violence in their school."[13] Peer mediation has been shown to reduce discipline referrals, violence rates, and suspension rates.[12]

Informal restorative practices

Informal restorative practices are small ways educators and other school personnel can influence a positive environment. Examples include the use of *affective statements*, which communicate people's feelings, and *affective questions*, which cause people to reflect on how

their behavior has affected others;[15] proactive engagement with students and families; mentor relationships; community service; and lunchtime table talks.

Social-emotional learning (SEL)

Social-emotional learning teaches skills such as "recognizing and managing emotions, developing caring and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically. These are the skills that allow children and adults to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices." [16]

III. Why Restorative Practices?

Within many communities, schools have deemphasized traditional school-based disciplinary interventions, while greatly expanding the use of zero-tolerance disciplinary approaches that exclude students from their schools through out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools or programs.[17] While the original intent of these policies and practices was to address serious threats to school safety, the reality is that the vast majority of these extreme punishments are imposed for non-violent behaviors such as classroom disruptions, skipping school, displays of disrespect, and dress code violations.

Research shows that removing youth from their learning environment for extended periods of time is not an effective way to manage student behavior. The American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force, after evaluating school disciplinary policies for 10 years, concluded that zero-tolerance policies fail to do what they were designed to do: they do not make schools safer. In fact, the APA found that zero-tolerance policies may make schools less safe, because schools with higher rates of suspension and expulsion "appear to have less satisfactory ratings of school climate, to have less satisfactory school governance structures, and to spend a disproportionate amount of time on disciplinary matters."[18] Zero-tolerance as an approach hurts the relationship between teachers and students and doesn't help students address their issues. Individual students, and the overall classroom, wind up worse off than before.

These harsh disciplinary approaches have also created a school-to-prison pipeline, endangering educational opportunities and making dropout and incarceration far more likely for millions of children and youth across the country. The effects of these policies include:

Academic Difficulties

Students who are not in class are, of course, not doing much learning. Thus, students subjected to harsh disciplinary measures that exclude them from school tend to fall behind academically.[19]

Truancy

Students who face harsh discipline often feel alienated from their schools, resulting in more absenteeism.[20]

Acting Out

Students punished by zero-tolerance measures often fall behind their peers due to lost learning time. As a result, they often become frustrated or embarrassed and proceed to disrupt class.[21]

Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Consequences

Unjust disciplinary consequences are frequently traumatizing for young people, leading to public humiliation, diminished self-worth, and distrust of school officials.[22] They also often trigger a cycle of disengagement from schools, where students become less trusting and more resentful of their teachers, losing the "connectedness" that is such a critical component of academic success.[23] As youth become more alienated, they also become more likely to engage in risky behaviors, violence, and alcohol and substance abuse.[24]

Dropping Out or Being Pushed Out of School

Zero-tolerance discipline sends a clear message to students that they are not valued. Unfortunately, that message has gotten through to far too many students who have been pushed out of school by unnecessarily severe disciplinary measures.[25]

Students succeed, and behavior improves, when young people are in challenging and engaging classrooms and welcoming, nurturing schools. Restorative practices offer an evidence-based, positive way forward for ending the out-of-school suspension crisis, which affects an

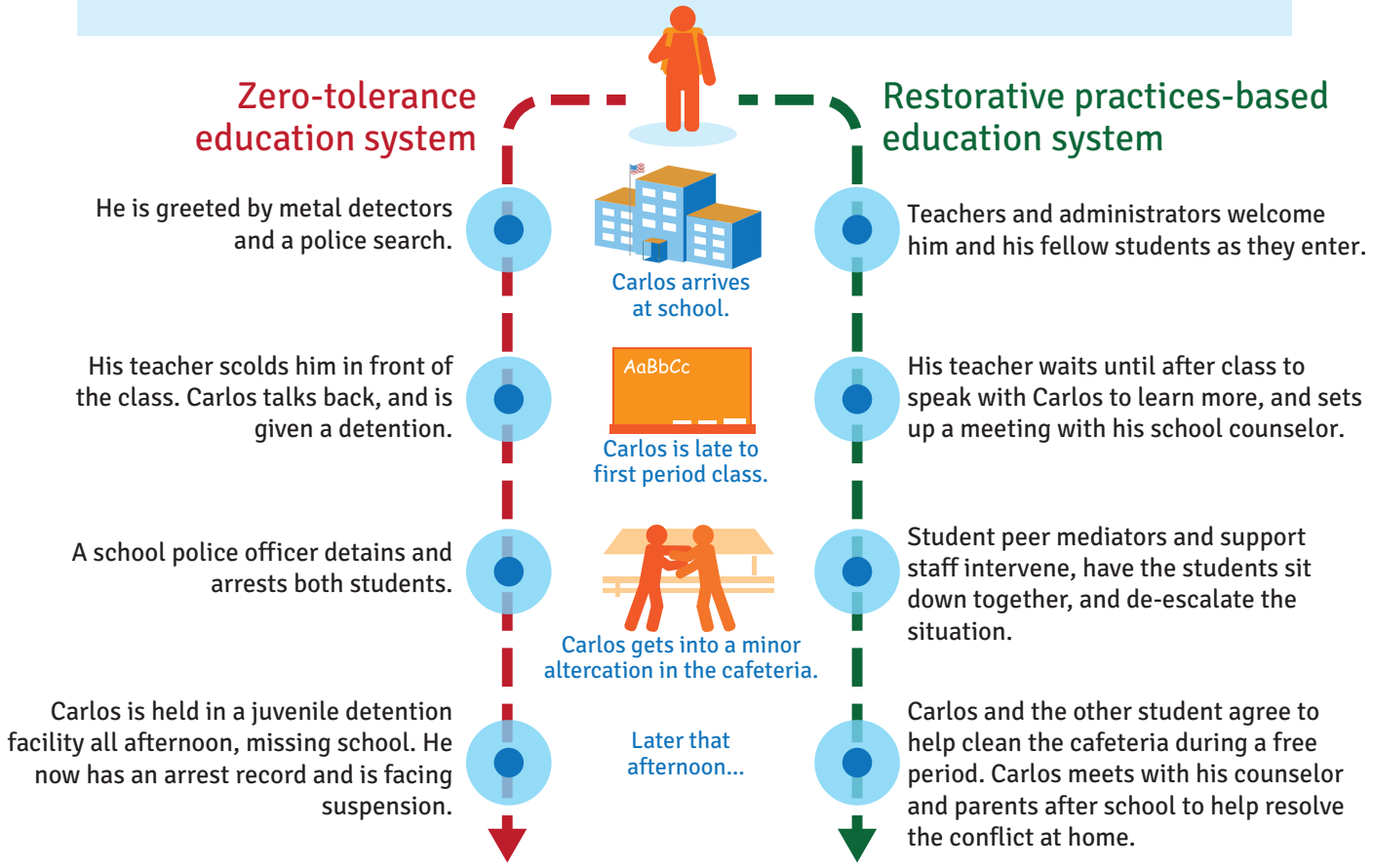
estimated 3.3 million students who are suspended and miss school time each year. Out-of-school suspensions have a disproportionate impact on students of color and students with disabilities.[26] According to the U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), "African-American students without disabilities are more than three times as likely as their white peers without disabilities to be expelled or suspended for the same behavior."[27]

Restorative practices can serve as an alternative to suspensions and expulsions and be used to improve school climate, foster healthy relationships between educators and students, decrease disciplinary disparities, engage students and families, support social-emotional learning, and promote accountability and two-way communication. When the culture and climate of the school is improved, students become more engaged, which results in improved attendance, fewer classroom disruptions, higher academic performance, and increased graduation rates.[28]

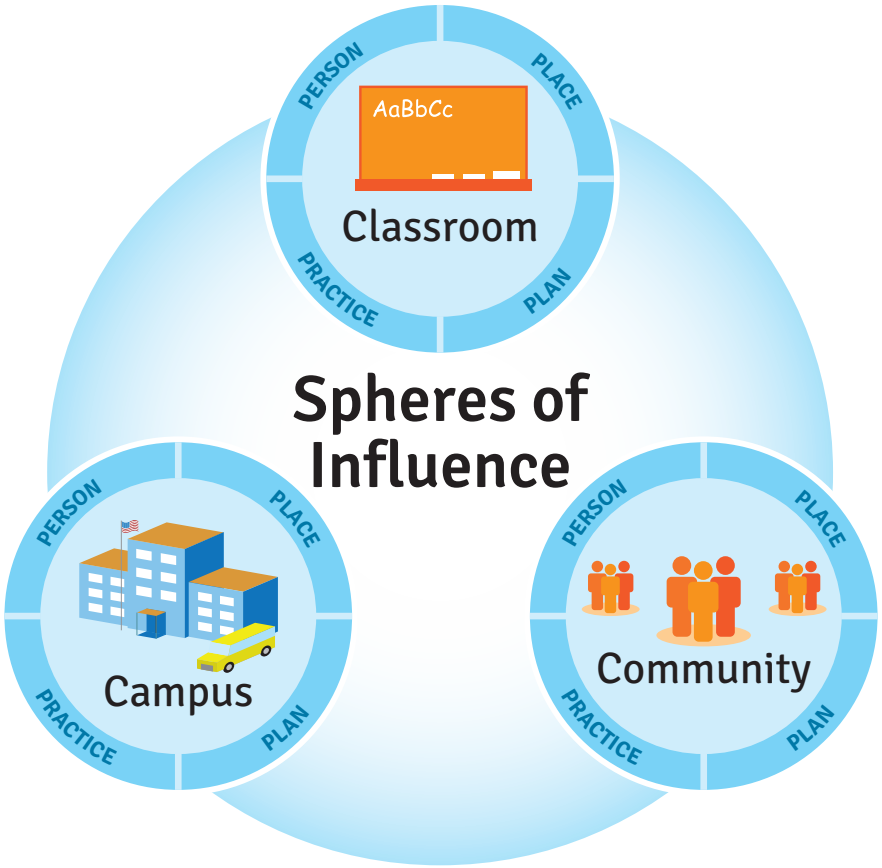
> "Last year I started and completed my training as a peer mediator, and I'm proud to say that I'm part of the change that has begun to happen in my school."
>
> **— Benia, age 17**

A Tale of Two Schools

Carlos had a heated argument with his parents before leaving for school, so he's running late. Let's see the difference that restorative policies and practices can make.



IV. Implementing Restorative Practices in Schools

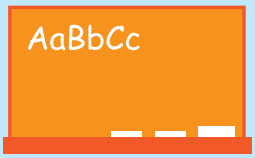


Every staff member of a school campus has a sphere of influence — a network of people and places where one can influence decisions, policies, and practices through one's interaction with colleagues, students, families, and community members. The "Four Ps" referred to in this toolkit provide a framework for thinking about, reflecting on, and promoting restorative practices in your sphere of influence, be that in the classroom, on the school campus, or in the community. Questions have been developed to link the Four Ps to the most common places where restorative approaches can be used. Instead of prescribing specific actions, these questions have been developed to assist practitioners in thinking through how each of the Four Ps are currently supporting restorative practices in their own school.

The "Four Ps"

1. **Person:** The way each individual (teacher, principal, counselor, support staff) interacts with others in the school community and how that interaction has an impact on relationships
2. **Place:** The environmental conditions and factors that affect how individuals interact with one another
3. **Practice:** Opportunities for educators to prevent conflict, resolve challenges, and create chances for relationship growth
4. **Plan:** A school community's plan for making restorative practices a regular part of school culture

CLASSROOM



The classroom is where most students spend the bulk of the school day in formal learning environments, interacting with peers and educators. Educators have an opportunity to model restorative strategies for students while in the classroom.

Person: How do I interact with my students? How do I interact with my colleagues, even when we disagree? If I have a conflict with one of my students, how do I respond? If I see a conflict arising between students in the classroom, how do I respond?

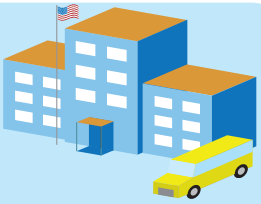
Place: What am I doing to make sure students feel welcome? How are students engaging with each other? How does the classroom design impact how students communicate with each other and with me?

Practice: What is the process for resolving conflict or disagreement in the classroom? How are students made aware of the process? Did the students help develop the process? What type of input do students have in finding ways to address conflict?

Plan: How is the classroom prevention and conflict resolution strategy linked to the school's plan for developing positive solutions or resolutions when a disagreement arises? If it isn't, how can it be better linked to influence the climate of the classroom?

Example: Circles can be used to teach subjects like history and government, address conflict, and build trust in a classroom.

CAMPUS



Staff and student interaction and learning don't just happen in the classroom — it happens on school buses, in cafeterias, on the playground, and in school counselor offices. Restorative practices can be used throughout the school campus by all staff to create and maintain a safe physical space, a supportive school climate, an academically and developmentally appropriate environment, and healthy relationships between students, peers, and staff.

Person: What am I doing to ensure that students feel welcomed and valued by their peers and other school staff? What steps can be taken to make sure the school is a safe space and accessible place, regardless of the setting (e.g. school bus, classroom, cafeteria, afterschool, and athletic field)?

Place: Are students, staff, and community members (e.g. parents and caretakers) actively engaged in school activities? How would an outsider describe the school climate if they walked onto the campus?

Practice: What is the process to teach pro-social behavior and build positive relationships between staff and students within the school? What is the school-wide process for preventing and addressing conflict or disagreement? Are students and staff part of the process? What type of input do students and staff have in finding ways to address conflict?

Plan: How are pro-social behaviors taught and used as preventative techniques? How apparent is the conflict prevention and resolution strategy to students and staff? How is it linked to classroom practice?

Example: School wide assemblies can bring the school community together to discuss important topics.

COMMUNITY

In many places, schools cater to the distinct needs of students and families. As part of that role, schools often are a bridge for caretakers and families to service providers, higher education institutions, faith-based partners, business, health, and academic partners. The ways in which schools interact with the surrounding community can have a significant influence on whether restorative practices become not just part of the culture of schools, but also the wider community.

Person: How does the school welcome members of the community? How does the school ensure that it is a culturally respectful and responsive place, regardless of the setting, for students and adults (e.g. classroom, cafeteria, afterschool, and athletics)?

Place: How are parents, caretakers, and community members engaged in school activities and connected to the school? How would members of the community describe their relationship with the school? What type of outreach is done to build connections between the school and community members? Are community members asked how they would like to be engaged? Do school personnel participate in community events?

Practice: How are restorative practices modeled by youth and adults in the community? What type of input can the community provide to address conflict inside and outside of school and in the community? Are community members/organizations utilized as resources in the school's efforts to address conflict or disagreement?

Plan: How does the school partner with community stakeholders to build relationships, prevent conflict, and promote peaceful resolutions to conflict? How do youth and adults address conflict within the school and community? Is it consistent?

Example: Parental and community involvement, mentoring, and volunteer opportunities can support and assist students with resolving conflict.

V. Action Steps for Practitioners to Support Restorative Practices

What can I do to start using restorative practices in my classroom?

1. Reflect on possible strategies you can use in your classroom to both prevent and address problems. How can you interact with students differently? Which practices could you lead in your classroom? Identify and involve additional stakeholders (e.g. parents, counselors) you would need to bring in to support your students and help them work through issues.
2. Talk with other educators about whether and how they use restorative practices in their classrooms.
3. Ask other educators familiar with restorative practices to observe you in the classroom and offer feedback.
4. Seek out professional development opportunities focused on restorative practices.

> "I have also learned that "preparing" for a restorative approach doesn't really work. You can't study the questions and answers like you would for a test. I have found that being honest and in the moment with the student is more authentic."
>
> **— Beth, High School English Teacher**

How can I help my school or district adopt restorative practices?

1. Talk with other educators and administrators at your school or in your district about different types of restorative practices. Do they understand the need for and benefit of restorative practices? What would it take to train and support educators in implementing them?

2. Establish a team of students, parents, educators, and community members who can assess the school or district's current approach to school climate, discipline, and restorative practices.

3. Dedicate time within the school day, like an advisory period, to practice restorative techniques. Adopting restorative practices is a thoughtful process that takes time.[29]

4. Seek input from a range of community stakeholders, including parents and students, both in the development and implementation of restorative practices. For example, give a presentation at a school board meeting or convene an evening workshop for teachers and parents.

5. Ensure school and district policies and practices are aligned with a restorative philosophy.

6. Collect and examine data, both at the beginning of the process and throughout, to assess what's working and where, replicate successes, uncover classrooms and schools in need of improvement, and monitor implementation.

7. Offer ongoing training and professional development opportunities to build capacity throughout the school and district.

> "One of my favorite stories is something that happened this year — two 9th grade girls had been having difficulty with each other. I used a restorative approach with them and got them to focus on what they have in common, where their strengths are as individuals, and how they could move forward. After the meeting, we had an event at school where they both worked side by side with me in scooping ice cream for their peers and now are great friends who hang out on the weekends."
>
> **— Carol, High School Attendance & Behavior Dean**

8. Allocate funding for restorative practices at the school and district level. Although costs vary for each school, implementation is easier when school districts, county agencies, and states devote financial resources and personnel to implement and maintain restorative practices at school sites. Districts have partnered with community-based organizations, that may provide training at little or no cost to the school or district, utilized Title I funding, and reallocated existing resources to implement restorative practices.[30]

How can I advocate for restorative practices on a larger scale?

1. Share this guide with fellow educators.

2. Share your story and highlight the benefits these practices have had on your classroom and school and any challenges you encountered when implementing them.

3. Connect with statewide and national groups working on school discipline reform. Add your voice to the movement for positive discipline policies and practices.

VI. Examples of districts and schools that employ restorative practices

Baltimore Public Schools, Maryland

The school district reformed their school discipline code to reflect an institutional approach towards restorative practices by dividing inappropriate behavior into four levels and ensuring that many low-level offenses can never result in an out-of-school suspension. In the years following the reform, suspensions decreased and the school district saw an increase in graduation rates for African American students, and graduation rates overall.

Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts

Since 2012, numerous schools in the Boston Public school system have used restorative circles, conflict resolution, and mediation trainings in partnership with youth and community groups as positive alternatives to school suspensions.

Chicago Public Schools, Illinois

Using predominantly peace circles, victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing and peer juries, the Chicago public school system has seen a significant decrease in 'misconduct reports' over the last six years. In fact, the system-wide peer jury program helped prevent over 2,000 suspension days per year.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio

Over the past several years, schools and educators in Cleveland have emphasized social and emotional learning strategies as a form of restorative practice to reduce suspensions. The 'Human Ware' Initiative promotes student safety, support, and social and emotional development by using instructional planning centers to replace in-school suspension. Educators at the centers work with children, helping them cool down during difficult times and consider positive responses to problems.

Denver Public Schools, Colorado

The Denver Public Schools Restorative Justice (RJ) Project was implemented to positively and effectively address the growing number of out-of-school suspensions, which reached 15,000 in 2004. In addition to focusing on culture and climate, restorative circles are used as the primary form of restorative practice.

Madison Public Schools, Wisconsin

The Young Women's Christian Association of Madison uses the circle process to teach restorative justice curriculum to middle and high school students in eight public schools in the area. After completing the curriculum, students become Circle Keepers in their schools for their peers, staff, and educators.

Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota

Since 2008, Minneapolis Public Schools has offered restorative practices as a service for students recommended for expulsion, in partnership with community organizations such as the Legal Rights Center of Minneapolis.

New Orleans, Louisiana

The Center for Restorative Approaches, as part of Neighborhood Housing Services, partners with local schools to provide restorative training and professional development to teachers and staff, as well as providing direct services through dialogue. The discipline team regularly uses restorative practices (restorative communication, accountability plans, circles, and conferences) to intervene in student conflicts. These practices are an alternative to suspension, in-school suspension, and expulsion, and are a tool for re-entry after suspension and as a behavior intervention strategy.

New York City Public Schools, New York

In 2013, the NYC Department of Education partnered with the United Federation of Teachers and Cornell University to launch the Institute for Understanding Behavior (IUB), to assist public and private schools in preventing crises from occurring, managing disruptive behavior and teaching students the skills they need to cope with stress. The Institute creates an individual plan for each school, based on available data, staff surveys and administrative meetings. Participating schools receive training for all staff (administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, school-aides, cafeteria workers, etc.) in proven support strategies, and direct coaching from a behavior specialist in implementing new strategies and positive behavior systems.

Oakland Public Schools, California

The district launched a system-wide restorative justice initiative to institute restorative justice as a proactive approach to student behavior. The initiative includes professional development for administrators and school staff, redesign of district discipline structures and practices, and the promotion of alternatives to suspension at every school.

Peoria Public Schools, Illinois

Schools are preventing altercations, improving school climate, and using peer juries as part of the Balanced and Restorative Justice Program to address and mediate conflict in schools.

> “For the past 3 years, we have been using restorative justice and guidance interventions to deal with conflict so that we can reduce suspensions and arrests at our school. School staff, students, teachers, and deans are being trained in using restorative circles and other restorative practices. Parents are also being trained in using restorative justice to deal with conflict at home with their children. Students and school safety officers are meeting to share perspectives on safety issues and to build relationships. It works, I see it!”
>
> **— Neissa, age 17**

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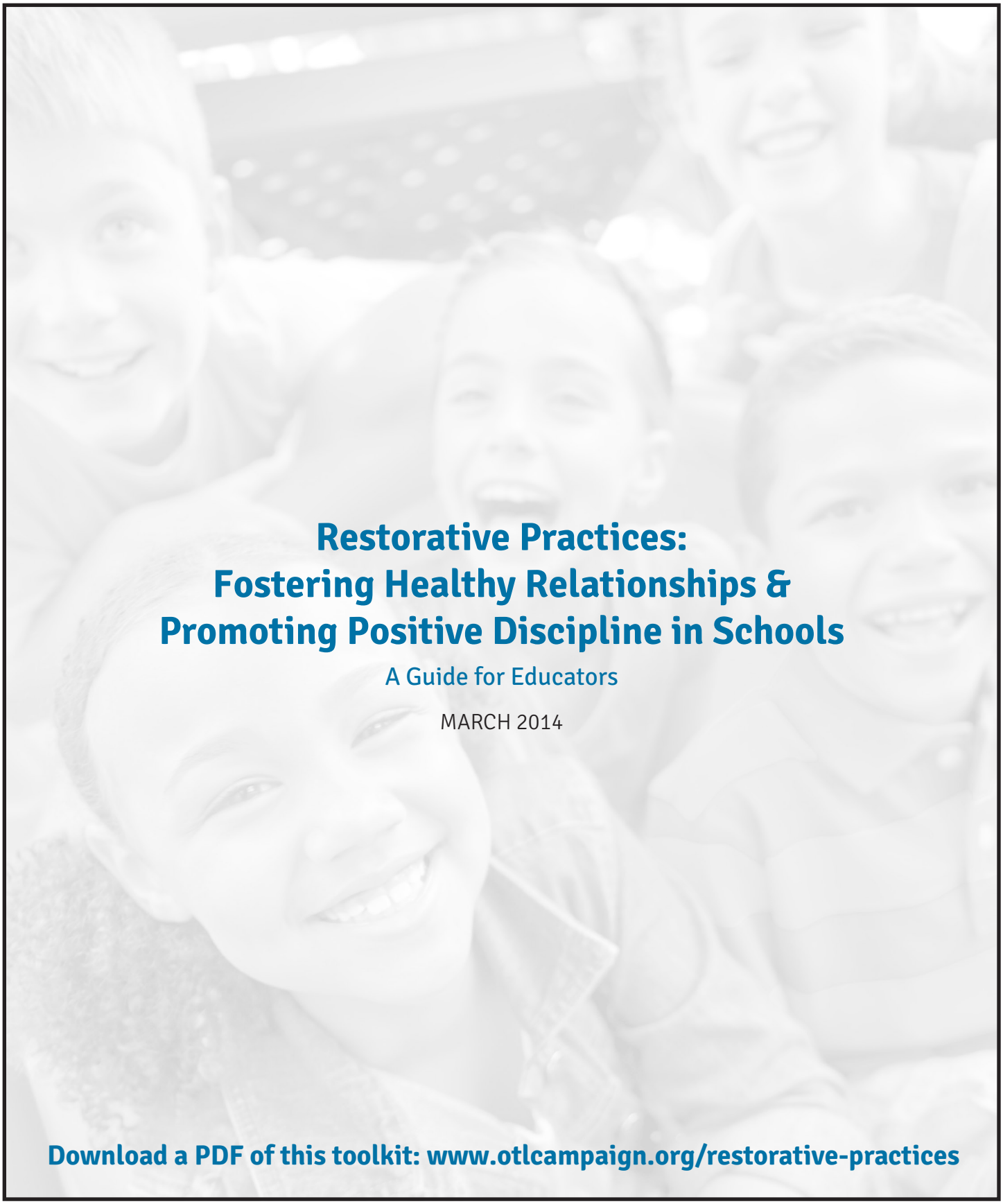

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