

Suspensions Don't Teach

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Restorative practices—an alternative to punitive justice—keep kids in school, where they can learn how their behavior affects others.

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The world of education is alive with buzzwords like innovation, inclusion, and mindfulness; another term gaining traction is restorative practices, also called restorative justice. Restorative practices are a burgeoning alternative to traditional punitive justice such as suspensions (both in school and out of school) and other exclusionary forms of discipline.

Many states are legislating a movement away from prescribed punitive justice for misbehavior in schools, and restorative practices are gaining in esteem as an evidence-based intervention that has proven successful when implemented correctly. Major school districts in [San Francisco](#), [Denver](#), and [Houston](#) are implementing restorative practices to combat inequalities in suspension and disciplinary referrals. These districts are finding that restorative practices, once understood, can be implemented with just a few simple steps.

A WORST-CASE SCENARIO OF PUNITIVE JUSTICE

Punitive justice is based on the consequences administered by our American justice system. When a student misbehaves at school they are sent to the office. After a generally brief investigation, a consequence that fits within [a](#)

[code of conduct](#) is given. In the case of removal from class and suspension from school, the student is excluded from campus activities—including instruction.

When the duration of the consequence is over, the student is inserted back into the flow of school without learning any replacement skills or exactly how their behavior affects others. In fact, for kids without good parental support or whose parents work, that suspension can look more like a PlayStation vacation, thereby nullifying any negatives associated with getting in trouble at school.

Studies routinely show that students who are removed from school for misbehavior are more likely to end up at risk, eventually placed into alternative disciplinary schools, or worse. This is referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline and, while it's a worst-case scenario, it is a grim reality for many students.

Restorative practices differ from punitive justice in that the ultimate goal is mediation rather than punishment. Students may still go to the office when misbehavior occurs, but the procedure is much different from an investigation followed by a consequence. Serious offenses will still accrue severe consequences, but the majority of offenses can be adequately handled with restorative practices.

As an elementary administrator, I dealt with all kinds of discipline issues that often accrued a consequence. I loathed suspending students from school because school is where the misbehavior occurred, and the replacement behavior needs to be learned and practiced in that same setting. In lieu of utilizing removal as a punishment, I strove to determine the cause of the conduct and look for solutions.

One very effective practice was to bring the conflicting students together and mediate a resolution. After asking for the students' permission to mediate, we would have an open and safe discussion about the causes of actions and reactions and reach an understanding that was agreed upon by all parties. These agreements looked different based on the situation, but the process was always similar in that a discussion took place, grievances were safely aired, and an agreement for moving forward was achieved. Even though I didn't know it initially, this is the foundation of restorative practices.

THE FIVE STEPS OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Restorative practices can be implemented in five steps that are rather simple to describe but can take some effort. First, the group gathers in a type of circle or around a table with clear sightlines between all participants, and the adult leader sets the purpose of the meeting. The purpose can be to build a learning community in the classroom or among a particular group, or it can be to address a pressing concern. Second, some type of token or totem should be used—the person speaking holds the token, and only the person with the token is allowed to talk. This skill should be explicitly taught and reinforced.

The third step: Once the purpose of the meeting is established, that should be the sole focus of the discussion—any deviation should be redirected to that focus. In this way, a very specific issue is the only topic discussed. In the case of addressing a concerning behavior, only one skill is addressed, which helps students understand its pointed importance.

Fourth, teach students to use “I feel” statements as those can better lead to empathetic growth when the problem is the behavior or actions of a select few students. When those individuals feel how their actions affect the other students in the group, they're more likely to change their behavior. Herein lies the true power of restorative practices: the building of family, community, trust, and understanding.

Finally, once everyone wishing to speak has been allowed to have their say, the group agrees to any changes that will occur, accepts moving forward together, and forgives transgressions. This is of paramount importance to let all members move forward and not hold lingering resentment. Everyone needs to practice forgiving as well as letting themselves be forgiven from time to time—this is a hugely important life skill.

A new understanding is igniting in the minds of educators today. Long have the best teachers recognized that relationships are the driving force behind real learning and growth for students. This revelation is actually the very old truth that is the kernel of a renewed emphasis on connection and understanding as cornerstones of school community. Restorative practices let schools grow as a community and give students permission to learn from failure and forgiveness rather than punishment.