

RESPONDING TO SCHOOL-RELATED VIOLENCE:

WHAT ABOUT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE?

BY DOROTHY WIGMORE

How do we respond to school-related violence? A “zero tolerance” policy? Progressive discipline? Detention? Suspension? Expulsion? Calling the cops? They all leave the needs of the target of the violence unaddressed, the alleged perpetrator punished without an opportunity to repair the harm, and no evaluation of the greater responsibility of the school set-up or practices.

Excluding a student—finding fault and punishing the “guilty”—is ineffective and damaging. There’s no evidence this “retributive justice” deters misbehavior or improves safety. In fact, multiple studies, some found in the report referenced in the first sidebar item, show excluded students are more likely to fail, drop out, have mental health problems and get involved with the justice system.

THERE IS ANOTHER ROUTE

Restorative justice and practices try to heal relationships among the parties and their communities. With origins in indigenous cultures, the idea is that an act or words perceived as causing harm need to be repaired. In response, those involved talk about their concerns with what happened and suggest how to restore things. It gives everyone a voice when someone feels harmed.

The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have adopted the approach. They co-authored a toolkit providing concrete models, frameworks, and action steps about restorative practices, which is part of a growing international movement taking this path, once used mainly in the justice system.

“It’s about making sure our kids and adults build stronger relationships with each other, building community,” says Scott Taylor, superintendent of Highland Park Public Schools.

Dorothy Wigmore is a long-time health and safety specialist, trained in occupational hygiene, ergonomics, work organization/stress and popular education. A former journalist, the Canadian has worked in her own country, the U.S. and Mozambique, and been involved in efforts to prevent job-related violence for many years.

“From the union standpoint, it’s a shift in the mind set of educators and administrators,” says Gary Melton, an associate director in NJEA’s Executive Office. “It’s a move from being punitive to understanding the whole child, to restore children into their educational setting, so they don’t end up in the school-to-prison pipeline.”

After a restorative justice workshop some eight years ago, and discussions in the NEA Black Caucus, Melton prepared a restorative practices program for Pennsylvania Avenue School in Atlantic City, where he was a teacher prior to joining NJEA staff.

“It helped eliminate in-school suspensions,” he says. The only fear Melton has about using restorative practices is those who implement it may sometimes “try to morph it into something it’s not and not change the discipline code and its punitive practices.”

HOW DOES IT WORK IN HIGHLAND PARK?

Inspired by the International Institute for Restorative Practices and Anne Gregory’s work (see sidebar), Taylor established an 18-person Discipline Study Group. After 17 months looking at different models, they chose one similar to that used in Syracuse, New York schools. A three-year implementation plan started last year.

The Highland Park model combines accountability and restoration in three ways:

1. Regular community building circles (facilitated discussions about current events, curriculum, school climate issues, etc.) that teachers will eventually hold every week.
2. Reactive “circle conferences” facilitated by a well-trained practitioner, in which:
 - Speakers talk as long as they need.
 - Participants include affected players and others who may be (e.g., parents, teachers).
 - The “restoration” is agreed upon.
3. Introduce language to be shared in the school, about what to avoid (e.g., “hate speech”) and more appropriate phrases to weave into everyday talk. (Nonviolent communication offers an alternative language;

see last month’s health and safety article in the *Review*, “Nonviolent Communication—a Tool to Prevent or Reduce Workplace Violence” at njea.org/nonviolent.)

The second step often is called restorative justice.

“The idea is to restore the person or persons who have done the offending to the community, recognize the harm done and that it needs to be rectified,” Taylor explains.

Eight teachers in two schools (one middle, one high) received seven days of training about restorative practices and skills to let them train peers.

“We will still be responding to violations of (the conduct code) with discipline, but helping them express themselves,” Taylor emphasized.

This year, the full-time dean of restorative practices is implementing the plan and revised code of conduct. Next year, all teachers will be trained to the same level as the initial eight.

“We’re strengthening relationships between kids and adult caretakers and their peers in the school, hoping it will compel kids to love their peers and adult caretakers to the extent they don’t want to be violent,” Taylor says. “We’re also promoting a real deep sense of empathy, so the kids feel more connected to their peers and others. They’re more honest with each other.”

At the same time, Taylor recognizes that restorative practices alone do not reduce inequities. They also “focus heavily on the capacity of adults in schools to be culturally responsive to the kids, to help them recognize the implicit biases they bring to relationships—not just racial, but religious, sexual identity, and learning ability biases.”

“Sometimes we may not be addressing certain behaviors that a restorative practice can’t tackle—maybe a mental illness that requires a deeper dive into other supports,” Taylor cautioned. “Resistance to including restorative practices in how you enforce codes of conduct is another possible issue.”

HIGHLAND PARK EDUCATION ASSOCIATION MEMBERS PARTICIPATE

The union likes the idea, although “we do think they rushed and put the cart before the

horse in the beginning, when they said ‘we’re restorative’ and no one knew what that meant,” says Highland Park Education Association President Keith Presty.

The administration responded to the teachers’ concerns, which included re-writing the conduct code.

“The integral part of it is not the restorative justice part, but the pre-emptive things that you’re supposed to do through circle talk, developing a better rapport, so students feel they’re part of the community,” Presty says. “If they do something ‘wrong,’ then they feel they want to rectify that to come back into the community. If we accomplish that, we hope it will lead to less violence.

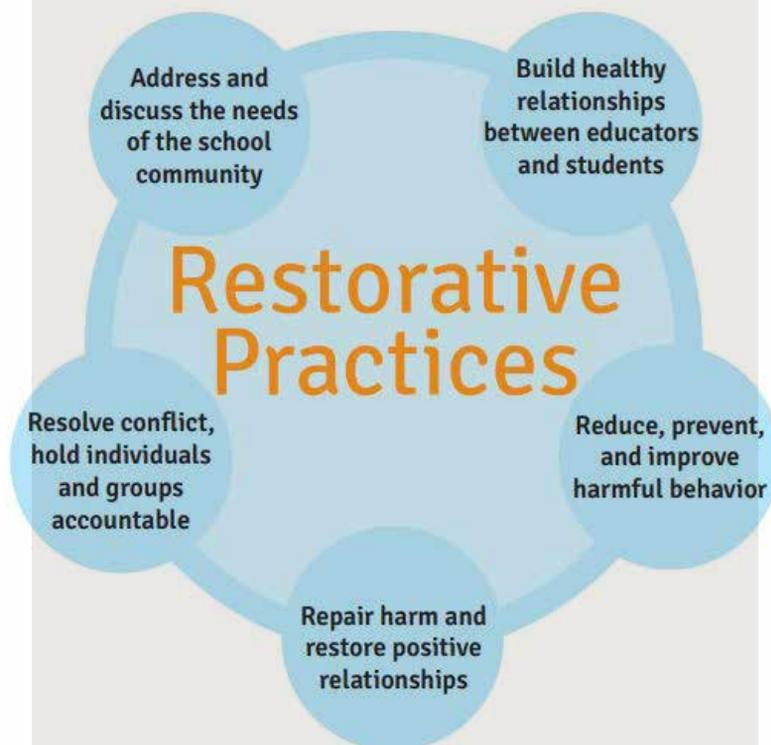
“Overall, I’d say what we—everybody—have been doing is not working,” Presty continued. “For anybody to give one of these programs a true chance they must buy into it. Do it the way it’s supposed to be done. See what the benefits, pros and cons are. Hopefully people will see the benefits from using the approach.”

In related efforts, Gov. Phil Murphy recently signed S-847. This bill requires public school districts provide at least 20 minutes of recess daily for kindergarten to Grade 5 students. The only reason to deny the activity is violating the code of student conduct; then the student must have “restorative justice activities” during the recess. A bill making its way through the legislative process (A-3519/S-2564) would set up a restorative justice pilot program in the New Jersey Department of Education.

LOCAL ASSOCIATION ACTION PLAN

Melton and Taylor are presenting restorative practices at the Safeguarding Our School Staff and Children: A Comprehensive Approach to Violence Prevention conference on Saturday, Oct. 20. Sponsored by NJEA, Healthy Schools Now, and the New Jersey Work Environment Council, the conference will be held at the NJEA Contemporary Building. To register, go to bit.ly/safeguardingschool. 

**RESTORATIVE
JUSTICE AND
PRACTICES
TRY TO HEAL
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AND THEIR
COMMUNITIES.**



RESOURCES

Advancement Project, American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, and National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, *Restorative practices: Fostering healthy relationships & promoting positive discipline in schools. A guide for educators.* (2014)

schottfoundation.org/restorative-practices

Anne Gregory, Rutgers University:

bit.ly/anne_gregory

Anne Gregory presentation to New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

bit.ly/gregory_njpsa

Dignity in Schools, *Resources – Restorative practices:*

bit.ly/dignity_schools

International Institute for Restorative Practices

iirp.edu

JustChildren Program, Legal Aid Justice Center, *Suspended progress: The harms of suspension & expulsion.* (2016)

bit.ly/suspended_progress