

5 Reasons Implementation of Restorative Practices Fails in Schools

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Everybody wants to jump on the bandwagon when the newest, greatest, and latest fad comes rolling along. Restorative Justice or restorative practices as it is sometimes called takes no exception but one, this isn't another educational fad. Educators are obsessed with the next best thing to educate our kids. This approach has its benefits as that energy to do things better and have better outcomes shows just how much most people have their hearts in a place of "best intention."

Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and Scandinavian are countries that blow us away when it comes to discipline for kids. These countries are moving away from punitive approaches to restorative and more accountability focused models for youth. Suspension is rarely used. As a mediator, I have talked with enough youth who see suspension as a vacation or time to play video games, that I no longer see a value in suspending youth. They like it and that should be our first clue to seeing its failures. We also know that suspending students **ups their chances** for drop-outs, interaction with law enforcement, and ups the chances they will use drugs. Punishment is and will always be a losing game.

Restorative Justice is a very viable approach to many of these challenges. It moves us away from just punishing kids and gets us to start thinking about supporting their learning and development. When we look at what punishment does and doesn't do (operant conditioning), moving to more restorative practices (RP) just make sense. Problem is that these practices are not defined and there is a lack of consensus on what is and isn't restorative. This leaves RP living in education limbo as a cross between a buzzword and a really effective way of transforming our communities.

One of the issues I see happening with restorative in schools is that districts want to say they are doing it when they are not. This has to be more than just stopping suspensions without replacing them with something restorative. If schools are going to move away from punishments, they need to move to something restorative and positive. That may involve some trial and error to find what works for an individual community.

Even my personal experiences with schools have been a series of successes and failures. Sometimes the failures are worth more to my learning than the successes. I have learned whole-school cultural change takes time and investment. The process can be painfully slow. It takes training, dedication, and careful planning. So why are so many schools trying restorative and gaining amazing successes and other schools trying it with little or no success? Why do some schools fail at restorative practices?

I think one of the biggest reasons is that some schools get stuck. They use restorative practices as a way to reduce the numbers of referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. It is also a way of upping the test scores. While those may be part of the plan, that shouldn't be the reason for doing this. Our focus can't be on the numbers, it has to be on the people. This is a plan for creating better learning environments for kids and better work environments for teachers and

staff.

There are dozens of reasons why schools succeed or fail at becoming restorative places of learning and growth. I want to take a look at just five main reasons I have experience in my work with schools and my reading of the reports of other districts:

1. Lack of Planning

For many schools, they just think they can wing RP and get it moving in the school. They see the implementation as a constant response to behavior issues and skip on the other pro-social elements of creating a restorative culture. These are the administrators who try to use restorative approaches to put out fires rather than creating a school where there are not fires to put out. Schools do best when they have planned out all the pieces they will need to succeed. I suggest every school has a restorative practices implementation team. This is the group responsible for supporting teachers and administrators, looking at individual cases to see if they could have been handled more restoratively, and a group who can create and maintain community partnerships. This group is also responsible for creating a roll out plan. The team is best made up of multiple voices from your school community including teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Its important to make sure the team has the key players who will be most involved in making the change happen. A big responsibility of the team is change management. Outsiders can guide schools in learning RP and the only people who know the school well enough to gauge resources, manage players, and roll out a sustainable plan are from inside the school community.

There is a checklist of things the team needs to address:

Staff Buy-in – Doing a readiness assessment to see if the staff is open to restorative practices. Coming into a school where staff are not collectively in agreement about restorative can make this whole process a waste of time and resources. These practices require a huge shift in thinking. They ask people to change approaches and values that were instilled in most people when they were just toddlers. Leaving punitive approaches behind for restorative and collaborative solutions is impossible with a staff that doesn't believe in the change. They may hold on to retributive and punitive system unconsciously and that is expected. They just need to also believe those things need to change if we are going to create the best learning environments for kids and the best working environments for staff.

Progress Checks – We need to be tracking the successes/challenges and progress of the plan. This means deciding what data to collect and how to collect it. This could include focus groups, surveys, evaluation forms, and other forms of measurement of the schools staff and students. When doing change management we need to be able to celebrate our short term wins and in order to have them, we need to be collecting data. Because the process of change is slow, short term wins keep momentum and offer meaning.

Logistics – This group can work out the logistics of these practices. When will circles be held and where? How will referrals be processed? Who takes the lead in inviting the participants to come? When can we do pro-social community building? I suggest having a concrete one to three year plan that spells out these logistics.

Systems of support – The team is also responsible for creating professional learning opportunities, peer coaching, and supports for staff in the day to day. They need to make sure training and learning happen to grow the shift in thinking that needs to happen for restorative to work in a school. This means making the most of failures.

Roll-out of the plan – The group also decides on how this all rolls out school-wide. For larger schools, this may be grade by grade where smaller schools may choose to go whole-school right from the start. The group needs to plan trainings, parent involvement, and the how-to of at least a 1-3 year plan. No school will roll out this out the same because every school is different.

2. Lack of Vision

The next thing I think some schools fail to do is create a vision with staff, students, and parents. To really take the time to decide what do we want restorative to look like in our school. What and who are we when we say we are practicing restoratively. In order for restorative to become the fabric that builds and maintains community in the school, everybody has to be working toward the same vision. What kind of school will we be when it comes to discipline and how do we create it? It is through this vision process schools will also see the ways they need to change and begin to manage the change process. John Kotter, best selling author of the book *Leading Change* writes, “Whenever you cannot describe the vision driving a change initiative in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you are in for trouble.”

Change is hard. There will always be the early adopters of change who jump right on board and there will be those laggards who are not interested in change and may even resist it. Having a vision also gives you something to celebrate when you see the vision coming to fruition. For many schools, they get wrapped-up in the day to day of “doing” restorative practices that they fail to have a vision of what is the end game they are working to create. When starting a journey, it is best to know where the destination is.

3. Lack of Training

Schools have long used the “train and pray” philosophy of implementing programs. Studies show that approach rarely leads to meaningful change if not partnered with coaching. In my own opinion, it will never work with restorative practices. Training is unbelievably important to making this shift happen in schools and we can’t stop at the initial 2-day or 3-day trainings and say, “oh, we trained them, so they know now.” Training is a tool for change not the end all. The trainings need to be on-going and supported with coaching and follow-up. Each one needs to deepen this personal change and paradigm shift we are asking each teacher and staff member to make. Restorative isn’t just an intellectual change, it is a change of heart about people and how we discipline for students.

I also think we need really experienced trainers for this work. Training of trainer models work for lots of approaches and I have my doubts about how they work in RP. It can take years for someone to truly wrap their head and heart around these concepts. Attending a 3-5 day training of trainers might do that for some people and I doubt it works for most. Learning restorative practices is more than just an intellectual exercise. It requires changing people’s hearts and I

don't think a training of trainers can do that for most people. Even if they make the change, are they ready to train others to do the same after just a few days of training?

Not everyone in the school will need the same level of training. Not everyone needs to be trained in conferencing since not every teacher will facilitate those types of circles. Key staff needs the training that fits their role in the restorative system you are creating. Deans and admins need to have the most training including conferencing, restorative dialogue, and circle process. Teachers need to be able to do respect agreements, restorative dialogue, and restorative circles when needing to respond to incidents where respect agreements have been broken.

Ongoing professional development is needed to deepen not just the skills of restorative but the change in thinking and feeling around discipline, behavior, and response. It's one of the main [complaints of teachers in LA schools](#) that there wasn't enough training for teachers in RP. We need to keep reinforcing the material.

4. Lack of Support

Beyond having the principal of the school supporting the change efforts to make restorative practices the norm not the exception to discipline and community building, we need holistic support from the school. This includes students, teachers, deans, and parents. Having the implementation team act as a guiding coalition of leaders in the change effort is not only important for the outcomes, it is important to the methods. Too often schools create support systems for change that include enthusiastic people who really want the change. That isn't enough to support the effort, you do need excited people and they need to be the key players in the change. Surveying teachers before trying to implement RP in the school is valuable. Having your front line responders supporting the effort is also key. These are the people students encounter when they "get into trouble" and get sent to the office. They are your deans, office staff, security officers, administrators, and even interns. I have personally seen interns handling students in an otherwise restorative school, in ways that made me cringe.

You need teachers on-board not just in making the change to RP but in believing there is a need for RP. Next, you need parents on-board so that they are not standing in your office demanding you suspend the "other" student. It is also helpful to have district support of the efforts so that choices and decisions are re-enforced by then leadership staff. Union support can also be valuable when possible. In the US, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) is fully behind RP in schools.

5. Lack of Investment in both Time and Money

Like it or not, any change effort in schools or organizations is coming with two price tags. The first is financial costs and the second is the currency of time. The investment of both is required to make this happen. Fully implanting change can take 3-5 years in any setting. Schools are not different. Implementing RP doesn't have to be expensive. I have seen schools do this on tight budgets and I have seen school districts blow tens of thousands of dollars with little to show for it.

Your biggest investment and challenge will be time. You need the time to plan and you need as I pointed out in point one, you need time to do that planning. You also need to allow time for

circles and community building. Most of all, you need time to train staff. These can't be little 15 minute blocks at staff meetings. You need to invest some time into training people. Starting with 2-days of training in the [five skills of restorative practices](#).

Financially, much of the study work could be done at low to no cost. Using training videos from [YouTube](#), book study groups, and Professional Learning Communities can save thousands of dollars. While having consultants come in and train staff is needed and recommended, it doesn't mean you need a million dollar grant. In some cases, the cost can be kept low if you rely more on independent trainers and implementation teams. Get key people trained in the key things they need versus blindly training everyone. Keep in mind, not everyone in the school community needs the same level of training. If the school is strategic in who gets trained in what, you can conserve money while still getting quality training services from knowledgeable trainers.

I hope to see more schools taking positive approaches to discipline and moving away from punishment. I believe with all of my heart that punishment is the main cause of violence on our planet. The sooner we move away from using it, the sooner our focus because healing and ending suffering, not ways to make more of it.