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# Needs and readiness assessments for implementing school-wide restorative practices

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**Abstract**

Persistent disparities in exclusionary discipline procedures continue to portend negative educational outcomes for students from specific racial, income, and ability categories. Restorative practices (RP) has emerged as a promising approach to mitigate these disparities and improve school climate. This study describes the utility of field-initiated implementation readiness assessments that might guide school districts

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by targeting the needs of faculty and staff. This study is a part of a mixed-methods Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) project made possible by a university and school-district partnership. The results reveal potential challenges and opportunities related to RP implementation and hold implications for professional development trainings for school districts that aim to implement RP as a foundation to employ more just and effective disciplinary mechanisms.

### **Keywords**

Implementation readiness, professional development, restorative practices, school discipline

## **Introduction**

The pace and excitement surrounding school-based restorative practices (RP) implementation to address documented achievement gaps and discipline disparities has surpassed the established research literature on RP implementation readiness and implementation effectiveness (Song & Swearer, 2016). Thus, more research is needed to understand the essential structures and strategies that foster commitment and buy-in among school stakeholders in the early stages of RP implementation. Moreover, validated readiness assessment tools that quantify and qualify justification for RP implementation are needed (Hurley, Guckenburg, Persson, Fronius, & Petrosino, 2015). In this article, we will briefly review the literature on RP in schools, focusing on RP implementation readiness and buy-in, and then we discuss the research-community context of this project before detailing the development and administration of several field-initiated RP needs and readiness assessment tools that served to inform district-wide RP implementation.

## **RP in schools**

The RP framework is emerging nationwide as an alternative to exclusionary and punitive school-based discipline practices (Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016). RP emphasizes relational connections, school engagement, personal responsibility, and repairing harm. It is preventive *and* responsive. RP is best described as an umbrella of tools that can be used to create a culture of care, to establish positive relationships that prevent conflict and misbehavior, and to repair relations that have been damaged by conflict and harm (Kline, 2016; Sprague & Tobin, 2017).

RP is most effective when schools take up a ‘whole-school integrated approach’ (Fronius et al., 2016). At the heart of RP are community building talking circles that serve as a universal strategy and a primary prevention tool within classroom settings to promote understanding, self-responsibility, and to establish a critical space for youth dialogue and leadership (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, & Espelage, 2016). Similar to other tiered school reform initiatives such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), RP is often implemented through a three-tiered structure of strategies and supports (Vincent, English, Girvan, Sprague, & McCabe, 2016). Tier I, or universal tier, focuses on community and relationship building and is meant to engage all stakeholders (students and adults) through the use of affective language, community building circles, and shared decision-making (Smith et al., 2017). Tier II involves the use of restorative conferences and dialogue to address and repair harm among specific stakeholders involved. Tier III generally involves formal re-entry circles and RP for students who have been separated from their school community with an intentional group of stakeholders and supports.

The emergent, though scant, literature on the application of RP in schools suggests that schools practicing RP faithfully experience a 44–87 percent reduction in out-of-school suspensions (Gonzalez, 2012). Furthermore, the nascent literature on RP also suggests that this

comprehensive framework improves the school climate for students and staff, reduces bullying and peer aggression, and increases student voice (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Ortega et al., 2016).

## **RP implementation readiness**

RP represent a school reform initiative, thus necessitating the involvement and engagement of adult stakeholders. Moreover, best practices in RP implementation often prioritize engaging with adult school base stakeholders first – giving primacy to the importance of building and repairing relationships among adults before including students in this work. These include administrators, classroom teachers, and parents, therefore, it is critical to ensure school/community buy-in and readiness to implement exists (Gregory, Soffer, Gaines, Hurley, & Karikhalli, 2016; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

As with any school reform change initiative, implementing school-wide RP should be an intentional and gradual process in which all stakeholders, including classroom teachers, are formally engaged to assess need, buy-in, and implementation readiness (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Several models of organizational change and school-wide change necessitate the exploration and determination of implementation readiness by all stakeholders, particularly those that will be implementing the interventional change strategies prior to engaging in the implementation change process (Scaccia et al., 2015; Weiner, 2009). Utilizing implementation science principles, Scaccia et al. (2015) outline three components of ‘organizational readiness’: motivation, general capacity, and innovation-specific capacity, that have direct implications for school-wide RP implementation readiness assessments given the critical importance of alignment between RP and school stakeholders’ attitudes, mindset, and skillset.

Although readiness assessment scales exist for other school reform initiatives and organizational change work (Bliss & Wanless, 2018; Holt, Armenakis, Feild, & Harris, 2007; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Kingston et al., 2018), there are limited psychometrically validated needs and readiness assessments specific to RP. For example, in a cluster randomized trial of RP implementation in 12 diverse middle schools in the Southeastern US, Green, Willging, Zamarin, Dehaiman, and Ruiloba (2018) detail their research protocol in a recently published article, including discussing two methods to assess readiness for RP implementation via (1) ‘small group readiness interviews’ that include questions centering on attitudes, implementation barriers, and facilitators and school resources/climate and (2) an adapted version of the Evidence Based Practices Attitudes Scale (Aarons, 2004) to examine faculty/staff attitudes toward RP. Given the dearth of widely disseminated and researched scales on RP needs and readiness implementation, a goal of this specific study was to explore the utility of field-initiated needs and readiness assessment of RP implementation in our partner school district.

Although not a readiness assessment, Mayworm, Sharkey, Hunnicutt, and Schiedel (2016) developed a multitiered model for RP teacher professional development (PD) that is incredibly informative for RP implementation fidelity evaluations and assessments. This model includes a hierarchy of assessments and data collection needs to inform effective PD training for teachers, with a specific emphasis on the potential differentiation needs of teachers that require targeted PD (Mayworm et al., 2016). The first step to implementing RP, as articulated by this model and others (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), is to determine the need and justification of RP implementation, specifically as it relates to the current school discipline practices. Various data sources may be accessed to justify and articulate the need, including office disciplinary referrals, school climate surveys, truancy reports, and rates of suspension and academic achievement. Once the need for RP has been identified (Step 1), the first tier of PD to implement RP school-wide should align with an

initial needs assessment. Step 2 in Mayworm's tiered model of teacher PD for RP includes pre- and post-test assessments of staff knowledge following PD. Competence and readiness to implement RP before and after PD trainings are critical to ensure that PD is effective and will lead to greater levels of implementation fidelity. Steps 3 and 4 relate to ongoing follow-up needs assessments after the initial implementation phase, often referred to as installation in the implementation science literature (Riestedberg, 2015), to monitor implementation and identify needs or assets for continued PD and support.

## **This study**

Aligning with the tiered model of RP professional training developed by Mayworm et al. (2016), this study will describe the utilization of several field-initiated RP implementation readiness assessments to guide a school district's change process to implement RP (Steps 1 and 2) that specifically target the PD needs of district faculty and staff after the initial RP implementation phase (Step 4). This study is guided by one overarching research question that is embedded within a larger multiyear CBPR evaluation project of RP implementation and effectiveness:

What are the implementation assets, needs and readiness to implement restorative practices in a racially and linguistically diverse school district?

In the section below, we will briefly describe a multiyear Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) mixed-methods project between a university and a school district to implement and evaluate RP implementation and utilization throughout the district in which this study is nested.

## **CBPR evaluation partnership**

The Burlington School District (BSD), like many schools across the nation, has racial, social class, and disability discipline disparities. A 2016 BSD Equity Inclusion Report reveals that while students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch compose only 46.7 percent of the 2015–2016 student body, they represent 79.1 percent of those suspended in the academic year 2015–2016 (Burlington School District, 2017). Moreover, while Black and Brown children make up 14 percent of the student body, they constitute 37 percent of students assigned suspensions in 2015–2016. To address documented disparities in exclusionary discipline procedures among students of color and students with disabilities, BSD identified RP as a promising approach to reduce exclusionary discipline and improve school climate. To support this work, the BSD signed a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in spring 2017 with faculty from the University of Vermont's (UVM) College of Education and Social Services (CESS) that supports a multiyear mixed-methods collaborative research partnership to evaluate the efficacy of RP implementation.

## **RP implementation at BSD: origins and early lessons learned**

As RP is not a predetermined intervention but rather a framework with guiding principles and values that can be implemented and adapted to meet the needs of the local school or organizational setting, implementation of RP across and within school districts may vary. Various critical incidents propelled the BSD in identifying, prioritizing, and implementing RP district-wide. The critical incidents included community and student organizing through walkouts, public action forums, and community events demanding transparency and accountability of BSD administration and leadership to address disparities in exclusionary discipline experienced by students of color,

specifically. This public display of criticism toward the BSD related to inequities of the learning environments for all students, particularly marginalized students, was underscored by significant changes in district leadership.

Although BSD started implementing RP district-wide in earnest in 2017, several years' worth of thinking and conceptualizing the issue, solutions, and related implementation needs were dedicated to operationalizing RP. Part of this early work was to create a vision of RP for BSD:

Restorative Practices are rooted in relationship building and rebuilding to create a culture of equity and belonging that results in healing and learning. The Burlington School District, in partnership with the Burlington community, embraces Restorative Practices ensuring that all, including those who have been harmed, will have their needs and experiences recognized and acted upon, thus creating a supportive climate of empowerment for all.

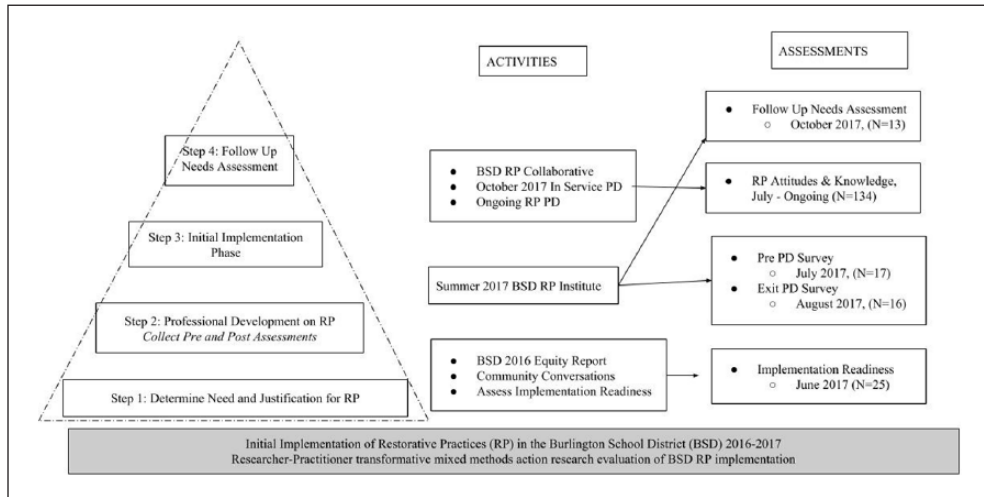
Furthermore, RP within the BSD is organized by several key principles including, (1) keeping youth and parents at the center of the work, (2) developing and building greater capacity within the district to implement and teach RP, (3) all voices are included and multiple perspectives inform this work, (4) using data to inform our decisions, (5) modeling RP in all of our professional interactions, and (6) building conditions for transparency to exist and model it in our work.

An early assumption of RP among BSD RP leaders was that the implementation of RP was primarily about students and engaging students to reduce suspension rates among traditionally marginalized groups, students of color, students with disabilities, and low-income White students. Operating under this vision and assumption, BSD leaders piloted RP implementation at the high school in 2016 to provide lessons learned and best practices for the larger district-wide rollout of RP set for the 2017–2018 academic year. Although this study is focused on exploring the readiness and buy-in of BSD staff district-wide, it is important to briefly understand some of the high-level lessons learned from the high school pilot of RP as it informed the process of assessing readiness and buy-in through structured PD. Although there is disagreement between high school administration and the early implementers of RP at the high school related to the effectiveness of the RP pilot, several key lessons learned include (1) lack of engagement with teachers in the creation of the RP pilot team and training provided, (2) starting the RP work at Tier II without having a foundation of Tier I process, culture, and community building circle practices, and (3) as a result of the limited teacher involvement and focus on RP within a Tier II model (repairing harm when harm is done), there was limited buy-in from the whole school community on the utility and effectiveness of RP.

Therefore, in preparing to modify the implementation and training structure based on the significant barriers experienced at the high school, several changes resulted in philosophical and programmatic shifts including (1) explicitly naming and seeing the value of RP for teachers and adults in the district as a tool for growth, healing, and relationship building with each other, (2) start PD activities and RP implementation planning with a readiness assessment to have more information about buy-in and implementation needs, (3) focus on creating building-level RP teams that would create an RP implementation map for their school community during the first year of implementation, (4) a focus on starting the RP work at Tier I and going 'slow', and (5) embedding PD activities, support, and coaching on RP implementation through existing and newly created district wide structures for peer learning and sharing.

## Methods

To enhance stakeholder buy-in and to assess readiness for a district-wide RP implementation within the BSD, several initiatives took place during the 2016–2017 school year. Community



**Figure 1.** Professional development in restorative practices initial implementation.

Source: Adapted from Mayworm et al. (2016).

conversations with parents, students, school board members, and school staff and data collection related to readiness to implement RP. The implementation-readiness phase employed by the district aligned with the PD model proposed by Mayworm et al. (2016). Figure 1 illustrates the various activities and data collection efforts made by our university-school RP implementation and evaluation team. This specific study will focus on Implementation Readiness and Follow-up Needs Assessment surveys, which correspond to Steps 1 and 4 from the Mayworm model.

### Sample and measures

As BSD is implementing RP across the district, the sample frame for both surveys are BSD employees, which is inclusive of classroom teachers, administrators, district system leaders, and paraprofessionals. The implementation readiness assessment for RP survey (Survey 1) was administered in June 2017 by members of the BSD RP leadership team targeting BSD administrators and BSD employees involved in the RP implementation-planning phase. As mentioned earlier, because there are limited RP implementation readiness surveys established in the literature, our community partners and RP national experts collaboratively designed a tool to assess RP implementation needs, assets, and readiness. This field-initiated tool is comparable with other RP implementation readiness tools that the authors have reviewed (Green et al., 2018).

The readiness assessment tool, an instrument designed to highlight qualities that allow a school to move forward with RP implementation, was adapted from a worksheet in *Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Organizations* (Allison & Kaye, 2011) by Alfred and Kidde (Kidde & Alfred, 2011). The tool was redesigned to help gauge district readiness to explore RP as a way to shift district culture and climate. The BSD RP leadership team further adapted the RP readiness assessment tool to fit the local school district context. The readiness assessment tool contained 40 questions with response options including, 'yes', 'no', or 'unsure'. In addition, several survey items contained open-ended response options for further follow-up to the yes, no, or unsure answer options, prompted by an open-ended 'Any comments on this?' category.

The follow-up needs assessment (Survey 2) was distributed to BSD employees who attended a Summer 2017 4-day RP institute, which focused on Tier 1 RP implementation and integrating RP

with other existing school-based reform efforts pursued by BSD, such as PBIS and trauma-informed practices. The follow-up needs assessment survey was created by the BSD RP leadership team and contained six-open ended questions. For example, one question asked: 'Please describe success you have had with enacting the plan you created on day four [of the RP institute]'. The purpose of this survey was to assess the effectiveness of the Summer 2017 RP institute and to assess current implementation needs of BSD employees in the early stages of RP implementation to help shape future RP PD events and implementation planning for the district. The participants of the Summer Institute consisted of school counselors, teachers, and administrators. The institute was explicitly designed to meet the needs of BSD. Every elementary school in the district was represented.

## Analysis

As the surveys described above were made up of a mix of qualitative open-ended and categorical responses to survey questions, we utilized principles and strategies from mixed-methods research to analyze the surveys. Specifically, we adopted recommendations from Creswell and Clark (2018) focused on analyzing data from a questionnaire variant of a convergent design. Given that this project is nested within a larger CBPR mixed-methods project, we also draw upon the principles and tenets of CBPR through collaboration with our community partners regarding analysis and interpretation. This ensures that our research drives collaborative action and change across the district (Lucero et al., 2016), with the end goal to improve academic outcomes and social equity for BSD students and staff. The categorical responses were summarized and the overall prevalence statistics are presented here. The open-ended qualitative responses embedded in the quantitative survey on implementation readiness were analyzed utilizing a priori themes that emerged from the quantitative analysis. These focused on implementation readiness and barriers and assets in light of previous research on RP implementation (Fronius et al., 2016; Kidde & Alfred, 2011; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). We applied the same empirically and theoretically derived coding processes to the open-ended responses from the follow-up needs assessment, Survey 2.

## Results

### *Implementation readiness (Survey 1)*

Of the 25 school-based professionals who completed a baseline needs and readiness assessment for implementing school-wide RP, 43 percent were principals or assistant principals ( $N=10$ ), 39 percent were department directors, including guidance counselors, special educators, psychologists, and an afterschool director, and the remaining 17 percent were classroom teachers. The respondents spanned 11 different K-12 schools within BSD, including alternative school-based programs. Table 1 includes the categorical responses to selected survey questions from the RP implementation readiness survey. These are organized into three domains: (1) implementation readiness and support, (2) implementation needs and assets, and (3) implementation barriers.

The vast majority of respondents (between 87% and 90%) reported that they were willing to disrupt the status quo and voice ongoing support for RP, suggesting readiness and buy-in may be high across school leaders in the district. A little more than 20 percent of respondents were unsure if they would be able to find time to invest in RP PD for all faculty and staff and to be able to reprioritize school resources to implement RP. Finally, only 40 percent of respondents indicated that their school possessed the necessary resources to gather data to support and sustain RP, and 26 percent of respondents indicated the existence of serious conflicts between school stakeholders would prevent collaboration.

**Table 1.** Selected results from implementation readiness assessment (Survey 1), *N*=25.

Implementation topic	Yes	No	Unsure or N/A
<b>Implementation readiness and dedicated support</b>			
Is there a committed person/persons for adoption of RP?	74%	8.6%	8.6%
Are you and your staff willing to change status quo and make decisions best for school?	87%		4.3%
Are you willing to voice ongoing support for RP?	91.3%		
<b>Implementation needs and assets</b>			
Are you personally open to coaching?	78%		
Are stakeholders able to re-prioritize school resources to implement RP?	60%		21.7%
Are you open to your school receiving training of RP?	82.6%		8.6%
Would you be able to figure out time for initial and ongoing PD for all faculty and staff?	65.3%		21.7%
Would a few school personnel be available for embedded training on conduct issues?	69.6%		8.6%
Would you like your school to deepen its practice of RP?	78%		4.3%
<b>Implementation barriers</b>			
Is there an understanding and commitment that this cultural shift will take time?	82.6%	4.3%	8.6%
If you have done something that impacted one of your employees negatively, are you willing to hear them in a restorative process?	82.6%	4.3%	
Is there understanding that efforts to change culture create tensions and responses that need to be heard?	78.3%	4.3%	
If you identify barriers to implementing RP, are you willing to make school stakeholders aware?	86.9%		4.3%
Is there a presence of serious conflict between school stakeholders within the school that would prevent collaboration?	26%	35%	13%
Does your school have the resources and desire to gather data to support and sustain RP?	39%	17.4%	21.7%

Table 2 represents the qualitative responses embedded in this survey, which are organized by the three same domains as in Table 1. These responses provide important narrative supplementation to the general trends presented in Table 1, specifically related to implementation barriers and needs/assets. For example, responses such as ‘we have people who are old school and want a punitive consequence’ and ‘we need to find ways to demonstrate incremental growth’ highlight the tension of engaging with tandem school reform efforts and cultural shifts. The qualitative responses suggest there is potential for initiative burnout as respondents pointed to the desire to understand better how RP dovetails with existing reform initiatives that are already underway.

### *Follow-up needs assessment (Survey 2)*

The follow-up needs assessment survey related to implementation needs and effectiveness of the Summer 2017 RP institute was completed by 13 BSD elementary school employees. Table 3 provides salient themes and quotes that are organized by the three domains derived from the quantitative analysis of the categorical responses to Survey 1 and the previous literature on implementation



**Table 2.** Salient themes and quotes from open-ended responses to implementation readiness assessment (Survey 1),  $N=25$ .

Implementation topic	Themes	Salient quotes
Implementation readiness and dedicated support	Importance of modeling Providing space, resource, and communication	'Implement in my classroom, wait for outcomes, see if teachers ask what I'm doing/want to observe circles in my class' 'Allocating time and resources and personally being involved' 'In many cases my staff feels marginalized as it is—I would participate with them if I can be sure it is safe for them'
Implementation needs and assets	Training and training materials, for example, books and qualified trainers Time, space, and support Resource prioritization	'Permission to prioritize restorative practices' 'Good resources might be utilized by stakeholders if resources are at their fingertips' 'Year long adequate training for at least a few'
Implementations barriers	Time and resources Administrative support Buy-in from staff Integration of RP with school and community context	'We have people who are old school and want a punitive consequence' 'Cultural consideration primarily' 'We need to find ways to demonstrate incremental growth' 'Funding, buy-in from staff, staffing to support Restorative Practices'

frameworks of RP. Participants positively reflected on their initial implementation of RP, particularly regarding the use of circles within classrooms and meeting structures such as faculty or PTO meetings. In response to a unique district climate issue facing all BSD stakeholders, participants were asked if they utilized RP to address the issue. A total of 62 percent of participants ( $N=8$ ) indicated they had facilitated or participated in a restorative circle in response to the climate concern.

Varied applications of the Summer PD were detailed, with multiple participants indicating consistent use of circles in classrooms by utilizing training and materials from the Summer PD. Implementation successes included the use of circles with parents and students and integration into school culture. Challenges included structural constraints, that is, time, staff coordination, and key personnel identification, and the need for further training to deepen classroom RP practice and to integrate practice into existing district initiatives.

## Discussion

Regular assessments are needed to identify implementation needs, barriers and supports to ensure that school-wide reform efforts maintain student and faculty buy-in and ownership to support implementation fidelity. This study describes field-initiated data collection methods to document RP implementation readiness and implementation needs over the course of several months within a school district in the early stages of RP implementation. Paralleling the existing although scant research on PD models and assessment efforts in RP implementation, school stakeholders communicated a high level of interest and positive attitudes toward implementation (Gregory, Soffer, et al., 2016; Mayworm et al., 2016). The school stakeholders in our study also identified concrete needs to ensure that RP implementation was sustainable and effective including: time, training

**Table 3.** Salient themes and quotes from follow-up needs assessment (Survey 2), *N* = 13.

Implementation topic	Themes	Salient quotes
Implementation readiness and dedicated support	Integration of circles into school culture RP to address current climate issues Use of circles with students and families	'I have held circles every day since the start of school! I also ran a circle with my parents at Open House' 'I'm working through Circle Forward with my class. I love the tone it sets at the beginning of each day'. 'Since August we have been running Circles regularly in several classrooms. This has been at teacher request'
Implementation needs and assets	Training materials and qualified trainers Student and teacher voice in implementation process Administrative support	'For Restorative Practice representatives to meet and discuss how things are going—what is working and not working—and adjust as needed' 'Getting together, ask students survey questions about circle, survey teachers level of effectiveness they feel circles have on their classroom' 'Regular connection with other practitioners of RP . . . Exploring the challenges with the intention of moving forward is very helpful to keep the momentum in the district'
Implementations barriers	Time and resources Maintaining consistency and enthusiasm Competing initiative demands Coordination of staff and administration	'the challenge seems to be with maintaining the circles in classrooms that have adopted them and continuing to engage students in the process' 'staff members have expressed having a disconnect with the big picture. How is this the same/different than PBIS and Responsive Classroom' 'Integrating the practice into the already 30 minute limit I have with each class weekly'

resources and PD, administrative support, and integration with existing school-based initiatives. Given that routine assessment of PD effectiveness and implementation needs is critical to ensure implementation fidelity and sustainable ownership from school stakeholders (Mayworm et al., 2016), the results from the follow up needs assessment survey administered to school stakeholders three months after the initial Summer RP PD highlight two essential elements: (1) aspects of the PD that were effective and being employed and (2) emerging needs of school faculty to implement RP. These include; initiative overload, contextual tension within the district resulting from a district-wide strike, and student and administrative voice.

There are several important limitations of this study including the use of a community/field initiated tool of RP implementation readiness that is in the early stages of validation as well as a small sample size. Thus, generalization of these findings is limited to our sample frame. Despite these limitations, the results of this study offer important areas of corroboration and growth with the existing knowledge base on RP implementation. This study highlights the importance of routine assessment of PD activities, in addition to effective planning of PD trainings based upon feedback and data from school-based professionals. The literature on effective PD trainings highlights the need for alignment with current attitudes, knowledge, and beliefs. It also calls for trainings that engage collective participation in their design and implementation (Desimone, 2009). The study also provides an illustration of key early implementation steps that can assess readiness to build a stronger case for why the change in practice, for example, RP implementation is needed (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). In addition, this study highlights concrete lessons learned from a

district implementing RP across all schools, highlighting the importance of prioritizing supporting adults and focusing on universal RP implementation as a foundational structure.

## Conclusion

As a greater society, it is unconscionable to continue to engage in systemic exclusionary discipline procedures that disproportionately affect minoritized K-12 students and do little to improve the academic outcomes of affected students. RP has emerged as an emerging evidence-based approach that holds great promise to mitigate disparities, to improve school climate, and to improve academic outcomes. Stakeholder buy-in is growing, but implementation readiness must be assessed to determine potential barriers, to configure RP fit within other district priorities, and to address the contextual needs of faculty and staff through PD. Although RP is gaining momentum as an effective support mechanism for K-12 schools, without standardized and reliable needs-based assessments to identify opportunities and challenges related to implementation, individuals, schools, school districts, community partners, and legislatures could end up spinning their wheels creating resistance inadvertently, and ultimately ineffective implementation efforts.

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