



Restorative justice practices have been in use in the United States for more than thirty years and its popularity is increasing around the country.¹ Restorative justice was born from the criminal justice system but easily translates across other disciplines, including education. According to the North Carolina Office of Indigent Defense Services,

Conventional prosecution does not offer an opportunity to heal, since the harms experienced by both the victim and the community are not repaired by simply punishing the perpetrator. Restorative justice is intended to reduce the fear, anger, and alienation experienced by both the victim and the offender. It is grounded in the belief that those most affected by crime should have the opportunity to become actively involved in resolving the conflict.²

In place of separating an individual from a community when he or she has done something deemed unacceptable, restorative justice stresses relationships as the key to resolve issues. Restorative justice diminishes traditional concepts of punishment, and stresses inclusion over exclusion. By implementing restorative justice practices in educational settings, schools encourage students' accountability. Students become more connected to their communities when they understand the impact they have on those around them. Restorative justice practices reduce risk factors in education by keeping students engaged in relationships and community and thereby act as a significant protective factor.

Restorative justice practices allow staff and students to develop positive solutions to problems, rather than employing the standard system of warning, detention, suspension and expulsion. Restorative justice practices encourage mutual respect and decision making, resulting in increased student retention and completion rates. Students begin to see themselves as valued members of the community and are far more invested in their schools, relationships, academic learning and future goals.

According to Laura Mirsky of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, restorative practices such as restorative justice "involve changing relationships by engaging people: doing things WITH them, rather than TO or FOR them."³ Mirsky continues, "Instead of zero tolerance and authoritarian punishment, restorative practices place responsibility on students themselves, using a collaborative response to wrongdoing."⁴ Support is essential to the success of restorative justice practice. It focuses on the impact an individual's actions have on the community as a whole and how the offender can re-identify with the community.

1 Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth, accessed June 27, 2011, <http://www.rjoyoakland.org>.

2 Margaret A. Gressens, M.P.A., "The Challenge: Evaluating Indigent Defense," North Carolina Office of Indigent Defense Services, June 2009: 39.

3 Laura Mirsky, "SaferSanerSchools: Transforming School Culture with Restorative Practices," *Restorative Practices Eforum*, May 20, 2003, http://www.iirp.org/article_detail.php?article_id=NDI4.

4 Ibid.

Restorative justice practices are a cornerstone of The Community Schools' educational philosophy. The schools observe weekly resolution circles, which allow students to practice non-violent communication and problem solving skills, and to work toward building trusting, respectful relationships with their peers and the entire school community. In this system, all voices are heard, as the group works toward mutually agreed upon solutions to problems, building a culture of mutual care and respect. The skills students learn during weekly resolution circles, such as how to respectfully resolve conflicts and listen to honor the feelings of others, while accepting responsibility for their own actions, continue to serve them well in their post-graduation lives, as they will have new skills to handle the inevitable challenges they will face in adulthood.

The Community Schools are currently working with The Restorative Justice Project of The Mid Coast to establish a Restorative Justice Institute for fellow educators. The Institute will be based on The Opportunity Farm campus. The Restorative Justice Institute will allow members of The Community Schools, along with their colleagues from Mid Coast Restorative Justice, to train other schools in the use of restorative justice practices, thereby increasing high school retention rates in Maine and serving as a model to other states.

Sources:

Gressens, Margaret A., M.P.A. "The Challenge: Evaluating Indigent Defense." North Carolina Office of Indigent Defense Services, June 2009: 39.

Mirsky, Laura. "SaferSanerSchools: Transforming School Culture with Restorative Practices." *Restorative Practices Eforum*, May 20, 2003. http://www.iirp.org/article_detail.php?article_id=NDI4.

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