National Center for School Safety

An Introduction to **Restorative Practices**

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
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About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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About this Guide

Who is This Quick Guide For?

This document is for principals, teachers, school administrators, school resource officers, school counselors, and anyone interested in restorative practices and schools.

What is the Purpose of This Quick Guide?

Restorative practices are one set of strategies that may improve school climate and human connections, promote student health and wellbeing, lower discipline rates, and reduce racial disparities in school discipline. These practices are often applied in tandem with other school safety strategies.

This document provides an overview of restorative practices and considerations for their use in a school setting.

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Restorative Practices Overview

What are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practice is "a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible."[1] Restorative practices have deep roots in Indigenous communities where the emphasis of criminal justice stresses repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than only punishing offenders. Restorative practices offer a common thread to tie together theory, research, and methods in diverse fields such as education, counseling, criminal justice, psychology, social work, and organizational management.

The implementation of restorative practices helps to:

- Reduce crime, violence, and bullying
- Improve human behavior
- Strengthen civil society
- Provide effective leadership
- Restore relationships
- Repair harm
- Build stronger and healthier connections with each other

The aim of restorative practices is simple: people are happier, more cooperative, productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority work ***with*** them, rather than ***to*** them or ***for*** them.[2]

Restorative Practices in Schools

Why do Some Schools Implement Restorative Practices?

The implementation of restorative practices can have the following effects:

- It characterizes learning communities with a sense of belonging and strong relationships.
- It promotes the idea that each person's unique, lived experiences shape their truth.
- It identifies conflict as an opportunity to improve and strengthen relationships.
- It develops accountability, cooperation, and problem-solving skills.

The focus of the zero-tolerance methodology has been on what rules were broken, who did the damage, and what punishment was needed. In restorative practices, it is critical to examine the damage to relationships: Who has been hurt? What are the needs of all parties involved? And what sort of agreement can be developed to repair the harm?[3]

There are consequences for offenders under both policies but unlike detention, suspension, or expulsion, restorative practices are customized to benefit the student learning process. The focus is not on punishment but rather on care for the individual.

It is also essential that the person who caused the harm is part of repairing the damage. The person(s) impacted the most by the harm should participate in the resolution. The goal is to achieve peace and safety in the classroom, school, and community. With training and guidance, participants in restorative practice can learn and practice skills to address harm and challenges, understand the consequences of their actions, and build positive relationships with themselves and their peers.[3]

How do Restorative Practices Fit in with School Discipline and State Requirements?

It has been shown that zero-tolerance discipline methods damage self-esteem, academic achievement, and do not create safer schools. Research demonstrates a strong association between high suspension rates, low academic achievement, and the failure to graduate.[4]

Evidence-based studies indicate that policies based on restorative practices improve school climate and human connections, promote student health and wellbeing, lower discipline rates, and reduce racial disparities in school discipline.[4],[5],[6]

Because of the findings of these studies, there has been an increasing focus on legislative support for restorative justice programs in the United States.[5],[6] Some states even require training on restorative practices for School Resource Officers (SROs). For example, Texas requires statewide training in various techniques to respond to student misconduct, including restorative justice.[7] When you are thinking about adopting restorative practices, be aware of your state context and potential laws related to school discipline. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have adopted laws that support using restorative practices in schools. These laws include training, funding, and other contexts as a way to respond to student behavior. To find out if specific policies about restorative practices exist in your state, please see the fact sheet, School-Based Restorative Justice Legislative Trends.

How are Restorative Practices and Behavioral Threat Assessment Related?

The U.S. Department of Education, the FBI, and the U.S. Secret Service have urged schools to embrace threat assessment—a flexible, less punitive approach to violence prevention—instead of utilizing zero-tolerance discipline.[8],[9]

Threat assessment begins with evaluating people who threaten to harm others and is followed up by interventions, like restorative practices, as a way to reduce the risk of violence. The foundation of threat assessment is its emphasis on weighing the context and meaning of behavior and taking action that is comparable to the seriousness of the student's actions.[10] When rules have been violated, restorative practices can be used as an intervention approach rather than punishment where appropriate.

How are Restorative Practices, PBIS, & Social-Emotional Learning Connected?

A restorative mindset can complement any school reform or school climate initiative. It can be integrated into anti-bullying programs, positive school climate initiatives, and schoolwide positive behavior systems.

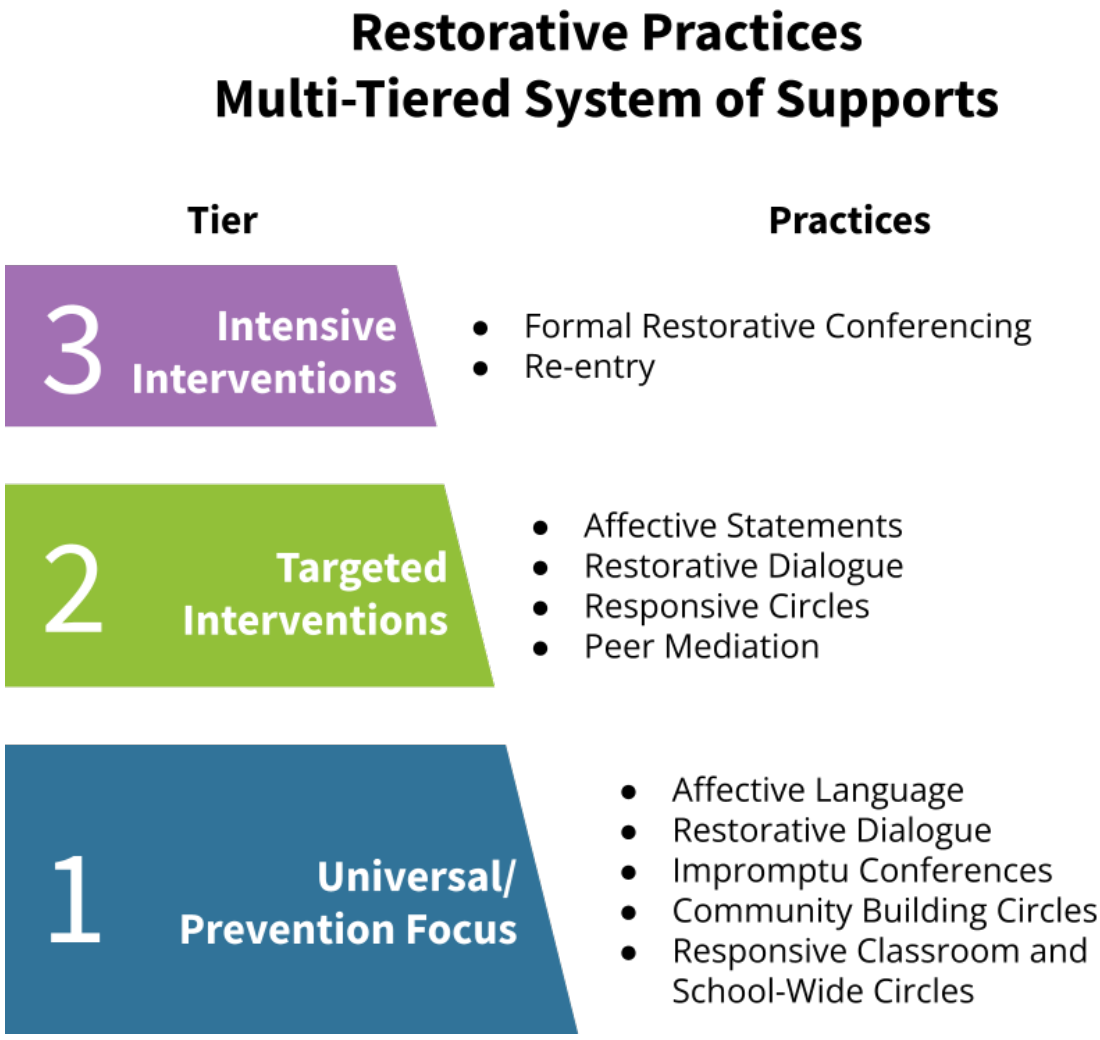
- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):** This practice moves away from more restrictive, reactive, and punitive programming toward an emphasis on preventing challenging behaviors; increasing positive behaviors; and providing more intensive support for youth with the greatest behavioral, academic, social, and mental health needs.[11]
- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** The process of acquiring and applying the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities; manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals; feel and show empathy for others; establish and maintain supportive relationships; and make responsible and caring decisions.[12]
- **Restorative Practices:** Restorative practices aim to develop community and manage conflict and tensions by repairing harm and building relationships. This statement identifies both proactive (building relationships and developing community) and reactive (repairing harm and restoring relationships) approaches. Organizations and services that only use reactive approaches without building the social capital beforehand are less successful than those that also employ proactive approaches.[13]

Restorative practices create an environment where everyone feels safe and open to sharing difficult situations, problem-solving, and listening to others. The use of mindfulness, calming techniques, and critical thinking skills helps everyone involved learn from past mistakes and make good choices moving forward.

How do Restorative Practices Relate to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support?

In schools, restorative practices are multifaceted. They include not only interventions when harm has happened, but also practices that help prevent harm.[14] The goal is to strengthen relationships, prevent inequitable disciplinary outcomes, and cultivate students' social-emotional competencies as they engage with peers to resolve conflicts.[15]

Tier 1 is a universal or whole-class approach to restorative practices since every student participates in community building to improve the school climate. Tier 2 restorative conferences typically target 15-20% of students who need more support with conflict and misconduct. Tier 3 supports include intensive restorative supports that 1-5% of students receive if they continue to struggle and require more encouragement. These are typically re-entry circles to assist with reintegration into a classroom after suspension or other separation.[16]



Successful implementation of an evidence-based restorative practices program requires program-specific training, the development of aligned policies and procedures, and a commitment to fidelity.

Implementing Restorative Practices

What do Restorative Practices Look Like in Practice?

The goal is to foster deeper learning and relationship building by teaching social-emotional skills that examine the root causes of negative behavior. By creating a safe and trusting environment, students can share and feel supported in resolving problems, communicating, and healing. Ultimately, everyone involved learns to value others and to change their behaviors.[17]

Implementing restorative practices in schools can range from a single program for students who have disregarded rules to a whole school model where everyone practices daily to cultivate a new school culture. There is a sequence of restorative practices that range from informal (e.g., affective statements) to formal (e.g., mediation).[18]

Common Types of Restorative Practices

Affective Statements	Affective Questions	Restorative Dialogue	Community Building Circles	Restorative Conference/ Mediation
Comments or statements about how others are impacted by one's behavior.	Questions that ask one to think about how their actions affect others.	Conversation to clarify responsibility and perspectives regarding an incident.	Structured group dialogue to share information about, discuss an issue or incident, and offer solutions for what happened.	Structured face-to-face dialogue with responsible and impacted parties to discuss specific harm and finds ways to possibly make things right and repair relationships.

Affective Statements

Affective statements can help students express their feelings and needs. Naming feelings helps students develop a larger vocabulary to use words versus acting out emotions. It also helps students understand the impact of their actions.[19]

Affective Statement Stems

1. Observation

Free of judgment, labels, or opinions.

- I see...
- I notice...
- I hear...

2. Feelings

An empathic response to others and an honest expression of your feelings.

- I am worried because...
- I feel frustrated...

3. Needs

The values that determine your needs.

- I need your help...
- I value fairness...

4. Plans/Requests

State what you want, not what you don't want.

- In the future...
- Would you be willing to...

Using Affective Questions

Collaborative problem solving is foundational to restorative practices. Teachers and students can work together to resolve conflicts and find common ground. Students can learn how resolution happens by using these types of questions:[20]

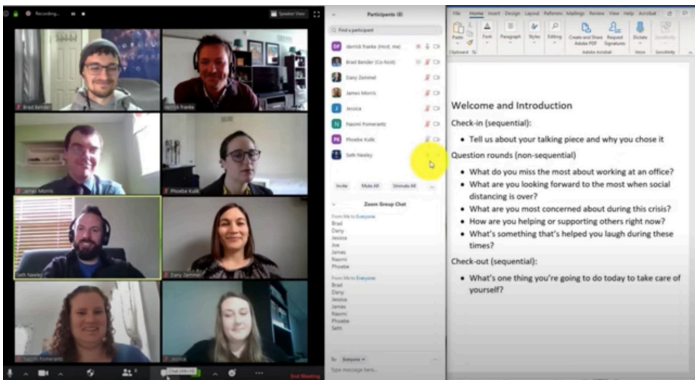
- **What happened?**
  - What were your thoughts and feelings at the time of the incident?
  - Who was affected or hurt by what happened?
- **What do you need?**
  - How do you want things to change?
  - How do we fix the problem together?
- **What is the plan?**
  - What needs to happen to make things right?
  - What is our agreement for the future?

Finally, the victim is asked what he or she would like to be the outcome of the conference. The response is discussed with the offender and everyone at the conference. When an agreement has been reached, a simple contract is written and signed.[21]

Additional Resources

Restorative Virtual Circles

Restorative circles are a great way to build positive school environments and maintain strong, open relationships in the classroom. **In this video**, Derrick Franke, trainer and facilitator of restorative practices with the International Institute for Restorative Practices, explains how educators and school specialists can transition restorative circles from the classroom into an online environment.



Restorative Practices Podcast Episodes

In 2015, the University of Michigan School of Public Health, Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice, and the Genesee Intermediate School District received funding from the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative through the U.S. Department of Justice. This funding was used to develop and evaluate a comprehensive school safety program, part of which introduced restorative practices in schools.

The National Center for School Safety interviewed several staff members involved in the project and released two episodes as part of its Comprehensive School Safety Planning podcast series.

In Part 1, staff members working at the Genesee Intermediate School District describe the motivations behind applying for grant funding, how the project got started, and the restorative practices they implemented as part of their grant. These include restorative circles, conferences, and re-entry circles.

In Part 2, additional staff discuss getting buy-in for restorative practices, coordinating with school resource officers, and sustaining programs after the grant period is over.

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