

RESTORATIVE MEASURES IN SCHOOLS: ALTERNATIVES TO SUSPENSIONS IN-SCHOOL BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION GRANTS

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Abstract

In 1998, the state of Minnesota appropriated grants for the implementation and evaluation of alternative discipline approaches using restorative principles and practices aimed at measuring impact in five areas: suspensions, expulsions, attendance, academics and school climate. The evaluation spanned three years. Among other things, the evaluation noted that consistent application of restorative principles and practices (e.g., behavior management approaches and circles to repair harm) resulted in significant yearly reduction of behavior referrals and suspensions in one elementary school. Acts of physical aggression reported to the office in the school dropped from 773 to 153 over three and a half years of application. A second evaluation of restorative practices, which was conducted as part of a two-year grant from 2001 to 2003, showed 63 percent and 45 percent reductions in suspensions in two inner-city elementary schools over the course of one year. Other evaluations from Australia, Colorado, and Pennsylvania show positive outcomes in terms of staff and parent satisfaction, student attitudes, and program completion.

Introduction

In 1998, the Minnesota Legislature appropriated \$300,000 to the Department of Children, Families & Learning (now the Minnesota Department of Education, MDE) for the implementation and evaluation of alternative approaches to suspensions and expulsions (Minnesota State Legislature Grant, *1998 MN Statute 398, Article 2 Section 57: IN-SCHOOL BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION GRANTS: 1999-2001*). Eighty-five districts applied for three-year funding and four districts were selected. Each of the four districts implemented a range of restorative practices and developed an evaluation plan aimed at measuring the impact in five areas: suspensions, expulsions, attendance, academics and school climate. An evaluator was hired to develop evaluation plans for each program. This final report includes a summary of restorative activities practiced in each district; program implementation challenges; and recommendations for further evaluation efforts.

Restorative measures embody both philosophy and practice. “Restorative justice” and “restorative measures” are interchangeable terms that refer to a philosophy and the practice of that philosophy to restore wholeness after harm happens.

- A restorative philosophy emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline, attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students, recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe learning environments.
- Restorative intervention practices seek to solve problems and rule violations by bringing together the person who was harmed, the person who did the harm, and the community (e.g., bystanders, classmates, staff, family, and/or members of the wider community). Together, they talk about the problem and how individuals were affected, take responsibility for behavior, repair harm, and restore order. Restorative practices in schools include victim/offender dialogues, group conferencing, and circles to repair harm.
- Classroom management approaches that support restorative practices include the community building process such as community circles, circle time, or daily class meetings; peer mediation and conflict management; building-wide programs; comprehensive anti-bullying efforts; and social/emotional curricula.

Three of the districts used the circle process to repair harm and manage classrooms. One district provided staff training on classroom and behavior management, used those practices with students in an intervention classroom, and provided circle training for teachers.

There is a growing interest in the usefulness of restorative measures, and a keen desire for outcomes that prove or disprove particular methods. It is important to read this report for what it is: a summary of the evaluation of each initiative. Evaluation is used primarily to observe the process of implementation with an eye for improving a program, not to prove a particular theory, as with research. Both qualitative (stories) and quantitative (numbers) evaluation methods were used.

Implementation: Common Challenges

While each school district's implementation story is unique, there were several common challenges faced by all as they attempted to implement and evaluate restorative practices. Gathering baseline data that was similar across all the sites was difficult. There were differing definitions and forms of suspensions: formal, informal, in-school, and out-of-school. Each building staff had to discuss and agree on what they were going to count. In two instances, an entirely new data tracking system was installed. Finally, all staff had to be sure to input the data. For two of the districts, gathering useable baseline data was a three-year process.

Another common challenge was providing training, as there was a wide range of knowledge (or lack of knowledge) about restorative philosophy and practices. Every staff received an overview or restorative measures, and was offered training with opportunities for reflection on staff application and outcomes. Support from the principal and from colleagues was essential to encourage practicing the new skills.

Getting administrators to use restorative interventions in place of or in conjunction with the schools' formal sanctions were difficult: sometimes district policy sometimes superseded a restorative response. Zero tolerance policies often clashed with the intent of the program. A restorative option was less likely to happen the more serious the offense. Consistent application of practices was also a challenge. Strong leadership was required at the building and district levels to utilize time, money, and effort most effectively.

Minneapolis Public Schools: Seward Montessori Elementary (K-8)

Seward is a K-8 Montessori Magnet school, drawing students from all over the Minneapolis school district. Seven hundred students attend the school, which has students that speak 27 different languages at home. The restorative activities focused on two main areas: using the circle process in discipline proceedings conducted by administrators to aid the victim and help offenders repair harm, and training the staff to incorporate community-building processes in the classroom. The administrative team (including the behavior specialist, teacher on special assignment, and intern assistant principal), which is responsible for discipline, used the circle, conflict resolution, peer mediation, and various versions of in-school suspension to handle conflicts and rule violations.

Implementation process

The behavior specialist attended training on family group conferencing and, along with the rest of the behavior team, on circles to repair harm. A total of 50 staff (out of 75 full- and part-time staff) members attended training on either the use of circles in the classroom as a means of teaching social skills and addressing harm or Responsive Classrooms, a classroom management program that covers academic and social emotional topics and includes the use of classroom meetings, similar to the circle.

The circle as a communication tool was incorporated into many areas of the school: from repairing the harm an unruly class perpetrated on a substitute teacher, to facilitating the focus of the chess team before practices and tournaments, to helping classrooms transition from the regular teacher to a long-term substitute, to use by the school’s conflict mediators. In addition, the behavior specialist used the circle as a means of conducting discussions about moral dilemmas or group challenges, such as exclusion or bullying. Those discussions served either a prevention or an intervention function.

The Seward School Grant Report, 1999, described one use of the circle as both a language arts activity and social emotional learning process, as follows:

We like to combine the circle process and quality literature to promote ethical character development. When we present a book with a moral value, we use a process promoted by Dr. William Glasser. The process states the first step is to generalize the value, then personalize the value and finally challenge the group to embrace the value as their own.

Outcomes

Below is a table outlining the behavior referrals and actions, as well as attendance over the three years at Seward Elementary. The abbreviations include

- ISS: in-school suspension
- OSS: out-of school suspension
- Behavior Referrals: number of students sent to the office for rule violations
- Expulsions: number of students barred from attending school in the district
- Attendance: average daily attendance over the entire school year

Note that Seward does not have an ISS room. Students serve ISS in another classroom, either doing assigned school work as the class goes on, helping the teacher as a tutor or aide, or participating in the activities of the class.

Table 1. Suspensions and expulsions at Seward Montessori Elementary (K-8)

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	28	28	0	not available	95
1999-2000	32	8	0	414	96
2000-2001	35	19	0	512	95

This school had challenges establishing their baseline data. The principal indicated that the final year’s numbers are the most accurate, as a reporting policy had been established and staff learned to follow it consistently by the third year.

In addition to the suspension and expulsion data, per the language in the legislation, each school attempted to evaluate more closely attendance, academic achievement and school climate. In Seward’s case, an attempt was made to track the specific attendance of 40 students over the three years. They were selected because they had been participants in a restorative process. The tracking did not yield enough data for analysis as most of the students transferred to another school before the three years were up. District-wide, there is a 35 percent

turnover rate of students transferring, enrolling for the first time or re-enrolling in a school. Seward has an 11.7 percent turnover rate.

Academic achievement was not tracked at Seward because there is no letter grading system on the elementary level in the Minneapolis system. In terms of climate, there were evaluations of the training and teachers use of their training. Teacher satisfaction with circle training was mixed, but a majority of participants indicating the training was useful. There was 100 percent satisfaction with the Responsive Classrooms training. By the end of the third year, approximately 70 percent of the teachers used the circle in daily or weekly community building activities.

Princeton School District: Princeton High School (9-12)

Princeton is a rural district of approximately 3,100 students, with two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. During the three years used for the study, the high school had a restorative justice planner in the building two days a week who conducted circles to repair harm and to support attendance.

Implementation Process

The restorative justice planner attended a four-day circle training and a two-day circle keeper training. Modeling and in-class circle facilitation training was offered to all teachers all three years. In the third year, the planner offered educational sessions on restorative measures and the circle to individual classes. In the second and third years, all four high school deans referred student for circles as an alternative to in-school and out-of-school suspension. One dean conducted circles herself. The ninth grade dean found the circle useful in preventing problems by dealing with early stages of rumors and misunderstandings.

This district had the least amount of money of all the districts participating, and did not conduct staff-wide training. As a result, the understanding of the philosophy of restorative measures and knowledge about the circle as a restorative process varied greatly among the staff. In addition, there had been a strong effort in the community to use the circle for juvenile and adult court cases, which had ended with some controversy. The rumors and perceptions of that community effort with restorative justice also left some staff leery of the attempts to use it in the high school. Referrals from teachers for students to participate in a restorative circle were inconsistent.

Outcomes

The table below begins with an accurate baseline of ISS and OSS, as the Princeton School District had established a discipline counting system prior to the beginning of the grant. Over the course of three years, the out-of-school suspensions dropped 28 percent and average daily attendance increased three percent.

Table 2. Suspensions and expulsions at Princeton High School

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	881	132	0	1,940	93
1999-2000	1,256	123	0	1,969	92
2000-2001	899	95	0	1,478	95

In the second half of the second year, the planner negotiated with the deans on behalf of students to reduce suspensions when students agreed to participate in a circle. As a result, there was a reduction of 8.5 in-school suspension days and 24 out-of-school suspension days in the second half of the school year 1999-2000. In 2000-2001, an estimated 18 ISS and 30 OSS days were saved, because the deans sent students to a circle in an attempt to prevent a suspendable event, i.e., “after screaming but before a fight.”

Except for average daily attendance rates noted above, recording the attendance of specific students was not attempted, nor was academic achievement evaluated, due to the limited resources of the grant. However, in a few instances, students were referred to the circle process because of attendance. In one case, reported in the Princeton ISBI Grant Report, 1999, the process helped to identify an underlying cause for the student’s difficulties in the high school:

A tenth-grade student was referred to circle for attendance issues. In addition he had also been in trouble for smoking. During the second circle he told a story about how he had not felt comfortable in school since he had been expelled the fall of his eighth-grade year. No one at the high school had any idea how traumatic the experience had been for him until both he and his mother talked about it in the circle. He told the members that this was the first time since the eighth grade that he thought anyone at school had really tried to understand where he was coming from.

At the end of the second year, the restorative justice planner sent an evaluation to the staff. Approximately 100 people were given surveys. Twenty-seven were returned. Nineteen were positive or very positive. Five expressed no opinion and three were negative with two of the three recommending that the program is discontinued.

South St. Paul School District: Kaposia Elementary, Lincoln Center Elementary and South St. Paul Junior High (7-12)

Located in a first ring suburb, South St. Paul School District has an enrollment of 3,570 students and consists of three buildings: two elementary and a 7-12 high school. A few staff members, including the superintendent, were instrumental in starting the local community restorative justice council, which provided support to the restorative justice planners in the school district. One school, Lincoln Center, began gathering data and implementing circles 6 months prior to receiving the grant.

Implementation process

In the first two years, restorative justice planners were located in each building, working with the administrative team on discipline, using the circle process to repair harm. In the third year, the number of planners was cut to two, with one serving the junior high, and the other splitting her time between the two elementary schools. Throughout the three years, the planners conducted circles to repair harm, circles of understanding in classrooms and circles to promote *Make The Peace*, a school-wide peacemaking campaign based on the statewide media program. They also provided teachers with modeling and technical assistance.

The planners attended a four-day circle training and a two-day circle keeper training. In addition, staff was trained in a classroom management approach titled *Restitution*, as well as in the circle process. The planners provided a variety of restorative training for the district staff, including summer weeklong training and in-services during the school year. More elementary teachers participated in circle training and *Restitution* than in the junior/senior high school. By the third year, the principals in each elementary school also used the circle process as a discipline option. A third of the elementary teaching staff used circles daily as a

community building tool, a third used it on a weekly basis, and in each building all but one teacher had asked the planner to come in to their class to help with classroom issues.

Outcomes

Each table below shows the behavior data for each of the three buildings in the South St. Paul District.

Lincoln Center showed the most significant change in numbers of discipline referrals and responses of all the buildings. There was a consistent effort on the part of the restorative justice planner and principal to address behavior issues restoratively, and most of the staff conducted circles in the classroom for community building and social emotional education.

Table 3. Suspensions and expulsions at Lincoln Center Elementary

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1997-1998	n/a	25	1	1,662	85.0
1998-1999	n/a	30	0	1,143	94.8
1999-2000	126	18	0	640	95.3
2000-2001	42	11	0	407	95.5

At Lincoln Center, in two years of circle application, behavioral referrals for physical aggression reported to the office went from seven per day to less than two per day. This decrease happened in spite of the introduction of a district-wide policy requirement that teachers must report any and all physical violence to the office. The number of annual referrals from 1997-1998 to 2000-2001 declined from 773 to 457 to 271 and to 153 in the fourth year.

At Kaposia, in-school suspensions increased while out-of-school suspension decreased, because the administrators changed their policy for out-of-school suspension. They wanted to keep students in an academic setting and working, and not give them a free day. The planner believes the increase in behavior referrals were due to the requirement that bottom line behaviors be sent to the office. In the third year, the planner thinks the behavior referrals increased due to the fact that she was new to the teachers, and therefore they did not ask for her help until a month or two had passed and they got to trust her. It remains to be seen if the office referrals will remain in the 400's in the fourth year, which might indicate an average number of office referrals for a school that size.

Table 4. Suspensions and expulsions at Kaposia Elementary

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	8	27	1	361	95.0
1999-2000	25	4	0	442	96.0
2000-2001	36	4	0	459	95.4

At South St. Paul Junior High School, there is no in-school suspension, as they do not have the space for it. Behavior referrals were not officially tallied until the introduction of the student-monitoring computer program in the 2001-2002 school year.

Table 5. Suspensions and expulsions at South St. Paul Junior High

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	N/A	110	0	N/A	92
1999-2000	N/A	65	0	N/A	93
2000-2001	N/A	55	0	N/A	94

In-school suspension is not an option at South St. Paul Junior High.

Behavior referrals were not officially tallied until the introduction of the student monitoring computer program in the 2001-2002 school year.

In the junior high at South St. Paul, suspension decreased 50 percent over the three years, even though the use of the circle to repair harm in the junior high school was not as ‘regular’ as in the elementary buildings; the deans and teachers did not always refer students to the planner, nor was the planner included in discussion of options for discipline in serious cases. In addition, the South St. Paul junior high students who had 1, 2 and 3 years of experience in the elementary school with all forms of circle, were quick to initiate circles, by seeking out the junior high planner for help with relationship issues, potential fights and other conflicts.

Eighty students (20 from each of the three schools and 20 from the community at large) were tracked for attendance over the three years. Their attendance did not show much change, which is not surprising given the high rate of attendance the student body had as a whole. In the first year, the same eighty students were tracked for academic achievement. There was no significant change in grades in the first two years, and by the third year all but two of the students had transferred out of the building.

Surveys were collected after circles to repair harm in all three buildings during the first two years of the grant, as a means of measuring customer satisfaction. A majority of circle participants—students, staff, parents, applicants and victims—indicated satisfaction with the process, with higher reports of feeling hopeful, grateful, confident and supported after the process. An equal number of participants thought the circle was either “harder than going through court” or “easier than going through court.”

The planners in the elementary schools conducted a climate survey of the staff regarding the impact of circles on classroom atmosphere and student discipline. The majority of staff agreed that the circles had a positive impact on those areas. In addition, staff agreed that the process was fair to teachers and students.

One of the challenges that Kaposia Elementary faced was incidents of racial harassment. Following is an example of a restorative process to address the use of harmful racial language, taken from the South St. Paul ISBI grant report, 2000:

A third grade boy made a derogatory comment to three other boys about their race. The restorative justice planner facilitated a circle of understanding. Through the circle process, the victims explained that the comment reminded them of: an uncle being shot by a white man who called him the same name as he was shooting him, a movie that has ‘those people dressed in white doing mean things to us,’ and a victim said, ‘It hurt my heart badly and I

need to do something about it.’ The offender/applicant explained that he then understood what he said was wrong. The students became friends and play together daily.

West Central Area Schools: K-12 Rural Consolidated District

West Central Area Schools (WCAS) consists of three buildings in three towns: two elementary buildings and one 7-12 high school, with a total enrollment of 970.

Implementation process

Over two years, 34 elementary and secondary teachers and administrators participated in 18 hours of Best Educators’ Practices training. Para-professionals received two hours of training. For two years the Best Practices consultant was available at the elementary level for classroom consultation for teachers and students. In the third year, ten teachers and aides participated in weekend training on use of the circles in the classroom, to repair harm, build community, and as a teaching tool, and some teachers began using the circle in their classrooms.

During the same three years, through funding from another grant, the high school provided a resource room for at-risk students. The students who were referred to the room were at risk of not graduating with their peers, and were not eligible for special education services. Their academic failure correlated with increased inappropriate behavior. The resource room teacher attended the Best Educators’ Practice Group, and incorporated the classroom management techniques and restorative principles for the sessions into her resource room work. She developed a problem-solving approach to help students work more effectively with their classroom teachers, and to catch up and stay up with schoolwork. A concerted effort was put into addressing the mental health needs of the students, and to inform staff how mental health issues affected student achievement.

While some attempts were made to try to be more restorative at the disciplinary level, the high school administrators admitted they needed to work at addressing the needs of victims, and to include victims and community in the process of holding students accountable for their offending behavior.

Outcomes

Below is a table for suspensions and expulsions, etc at the two elementary buildings in WCAS. Both schools enjoyed a high level of stability, attendance and a low number of behavior concerns.

Table 6. Suspensions and expulsions at West Central Area Schools Rural Consolidated District (grades K-6)

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	no data	0	0	62	96
1999-2000	no data	0	0	78	96
2000-2001	9	2	0	44	97

The elementary schools showed an over-all reduction in discipline referrals, but did not have data for ISS. At the high school, the district installed a computer program for tracking discipline in 1999-00, but

Documentation of disciplinary actions was not consistent until 2000-01. As a result, baseline data shown in the table below is not accurate on anything except expulsions.

Table 7. Suspensions and expulsions at West Central Area Schools Rural Consolidated District High School (grades 7-12)

School Year	ISS	OSS	Expulsions	Behavior Referrals	Attendance (percent)
1998-1999	42	no data	2	233	94
1999-2000	25	2	1	237	98
2000-2001	44	13	1	195	97

The daily attendance of twenty-nine high school students who participated in the resource room was tracked for three years. Students were absent from school an average of 3.4 days per quarter before the intervention and an average of 2.9 days after the intervention. This average difference of - 0.5 days was not statistically significant. The thirty-nine high school students tracked for academic performance showed improvement. The mean percentage of credits earned by evaluated group was 83.5 percent. After participation in the resource room the percentage increased to 90.4 percent for the time period including (and in some cases following) their involvement in the resource room. This increase of 6.9 percent was statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level.

By identifying students at risk behaviorally or academically, and supporting them to succeed, the school reaped several benefits. The behavior of students attending the resource room improved; few were sent to the office for any rule violation. The resource room teacher identified the need for students to be able to track their credits towards grade level advancement and graduation, which in turn set in motion academic and mental health interventions for several students who were very far behind academically. The principal indicated that the school graduated 8 students that had all the indications of dropping out of school. Besides the success of graduating students, the district reaped the financial benefit of keeping \$5,000 per student or \$40,000 total, a significant sum for a small, rural district.

The Best Educators' Practices Group and the para-professional training sessions received very positive evaluations. The Practice Group reported higher levels of professional satisfaction and feelings of support from their peers. At the beginning of the third year, the high school faculty made a commitment to address bullying, respect for staff and among students, and to discuss what they as a staff could do to reduce student failure in the 2000-01 school year. This was significant in that in the past the staff as a whole had a tendency to blame only the students for all the behavior challenges in the school, rather than considering that a safe school was the result of a focused effort by everyone.

Summary and Conclusions

The three-year implementation and evaluation of restorative practices in four school district showed promise as an alternative to exclusionary practices such as suspension and as a means of improving elements of school climate. Specifically,

- Consistent application of restorative principles and practices (e.g., behavior management approaches and circles to repair harm) resulted in significant yearly reduction of behavior referrals and suspensions in one elementary school.

- Using circles to repair harm as an alternative to suspension in two high schools resulted in 28 percent and 50 percent reductions in out of school suspensions.
- A problem-solving resource room for at-risk students resulted in increased academic achievement in a high school.
- Teacher in-services on behavior management resulted in higher professional satisfaction.
- Teacher training resulted in high levels of teacher application in the classroom—in five elementary buildings, 50-70 percent of teachers used circles, behavior management skills, and classroom management techniques.

Trying to measure whether the restorative process works does raise a question about other disciplinary actions: do suspension and expulsion work? As part of a 1998 study on school suspensions, Costenbader and Markson (1998) summarized research on the serious and negative side effects of in- and out-of-school suspension. Suspension has been correlated with drug use, poor academic achievement, grade retention and long-term disaffection, alienation and involvement with the legal system.

All disciplinary approaches should be continuously evaluated for effectiveness, and not used solely because of tradition or newness. Certainly, no single process can address all of the harm that happens in a school or community. Schools need a variety of approaches to help the variety of students who enter their doors each day. Restorative measures are showing promise when applied consistently, both as an intervention and as a way to build community in the school. However, further evaluation and research is warranted to assess the intended and unintended outcomes of restorative practices in schools.

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Biography

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