Taking Restorative Practices School-wide:

Insights from Three Schools in Denver

Yolanda Anyon, MSW, Ph.D.

A report of the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership

Advancement Project – just democracy!
DCTA
Denver Public Schools – Discover a World of Opportunity
nea National Education Association
CAO Center for Advocacy and Outreach
Padres & Jóvenes Unidos
University of Denver – Graduate School of Social Work

About the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership

The Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership is a coalition of racial justice, education, labor and community groups working to ensure widespread and high-quality implementation of restorative practices in Denver Public Schools and beyond. Restorative practices are alternatives to punitive school disciplinary policies that have proven ineffective and racially discriminatory. Using approaches such as dialogues, peace circles, conferencing, and peer-led mediation, restorative practices get to the root cause of student behavior. Educators also say restorative practices identify issues too minor to be addressed with harsh school disciplinary responses—suspensions, police tickets, removal from class and isolation from other students—and create plans for students to both learn from and make amends for mistakes. When fully implemented, restorative practices improve school climate, increase academic achievement and reduce racial disparities in school discipline.

Through the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership, the youth and parent group, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos; the national racial justice organization, Advancement Project; the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver (DU); and the National Education Association (NEA) are documenting successful restorative practices programs in Denver schools and then sharing the model for success with other districts across the country that are seeking to replicate, scale and sustain these practices.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following for their contributions to this report:

School leaders and staff members at North High School, Skinner Middle School, and Hallett Fundamental Academy for taking the time to share their experiences and provide feedback on this publication. The names of participants are listed only when explicit permission was provided by that individual.

Members of Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership for developing this research project and helping with data collection. Special thanks to Daniel Kim from Padres & Jóvenes Unidos for his support with coordinating the focus groups and interviews at each school site.

Jessica Ramey Yang, doctoral candidate in social work, for her research assistance, including but not limited to transcribing and coding the focus group and interviews.

And finally, the Center for Advocacy and Outreach at the National Education Association for sponsoring this study.

Distribution and Citation of this Report

> Anyon, Y. (2016). *Taking restorative practices school-wide: Insights from three schools in Denver*. Denver, CO: Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through interviews and focus groups with staff members at three Denver schools that have successfully implemented restorative practices (RP), four essential strategies for taking this approach school-wide were identified: strong principal vision and commitment to RP; explicit efforts to generate staff buy-in to this conflict resolution approach; continuous and intensive professional development opportunities; and, the allocation of school funds for a full-time coordinator of RP at the site. Additional approaches that supported school-wide implementation of RP are described in the full report.

Principal Vision & Commitment

Taking restorative practices school-wide was possible because administrators held the following beliefs:

- Exclusionary discipline practices, such as expulsion and suspension, generally fail to change student behavior.
- Students' time in class is a key factor in determining their educational success.
- Proactively teaching students social, emotional, and conflict resolution skills improves their behavior and promotes their academic achievement.
- Standing by the philosophy of restorative practices when faced with resistance to change is worth the effort.

Staff Buy-In

Widespread buy-in to restorative practices among stakeholders was generated using the following strategies:

- Involving teachers, service providers, and community members in development of policies and protocols that guide the delivery of restorative practices and their integration into discipline processes.
- Soliciting regular feedback from staff throughout the implementation process.
- When hiring new staff, including teachers, assess their support for the restorative practices philosophy.

Professional Development

Capacity to implement restorative practices throughout the school was supported by:

- Initial commitment of substantial professional development time to new discipline policies and protocols, restorative practices, and allied relationship-building approaches.
- Availability of "booster sessions" for revisiting discipline processes and restorative practices.
- Allocation of additional resources for individualized coaching among staff members who have difficulty aligning their practices with a restorative philosophy.

Full-Time RP Coordinator

To sustain all the other essential strategies for success, schools had to dedicate funding for a person with the following responsibilities:

- Develop positive relationships with students, teachers and families.
- Facilitate formal conferences and mediations.
- Monitor student agreements to repair harm caused.
- Provide coaching and training to other staff members

> I'm thinking of one of our freshman, male, Hispanic students. He came to us from a district where he was systemically taught that you will be removed from this situation and punished, and then you'll be brought back into that same environment. So by the time he comes to us as a 9th grader, it was about undoing systems that he had lived in for so long. He really thought that whatever he did, he would be kicked out. That's a lot of trauma and a lot of repair. He's [still] a work in progress, but you know what? He's turned it around and he really gets it. He gets what restorative [practices] mean for his future, his daily interactions with peers, with teachers, on the athletic field, he gets it. That's what I feel like the power of restorative approaches can really do when you're talking about the kids that we always worry about losing.
>
> – Stacy Parrish, current North High School Principal Resident, former Assistant Principal

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to document the successes of schools in Denver that have implemented restorative practices (RP) school-wide and identify models or strategies to share with others who are seeking to replicate, scale and sustain this approach to school discipline reform.

METHODS

Study Sites

North High School, Skinner Middle School and Hallett Fundamental Academy were selected as demonstration sites by the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership (DSBRPP) leadership team based on the following criteria: an extensive history of implementing restorative practices; representation of different grade-levels; diverse student populations with high needs; commitment from school leaders to addressing issues of equity; and, school staff members' enthusiasm about participating in the partnership. As observed by the leadership team during site visits, and anecdotally reported by students, parents, community members, and school staff, these three schools built a positive culture of responsive practices in which teachers and families felt supported. Of equal importance, since the introduction of restorative practices at North, Skinner and Hallett out-of-school suspension rates have steadily decreased, while indicators of achievement have increased.

North High School

As part of a pilot program funded by the state from 2006–2009, restorative practices were implemented at North High School (NHS) after school and district leaders, community organizers, students and families pushed for change in discipline practices and academic opportunities for students in the neighborhood. Around that time, this neighborhood school enrolled 1,079 students in grades 9–12: 93% were students of color, 87% were eligible for free or reduced lunch, 11% were classified as English Language Learners; and 18% participated in special education. NHS now uses site funding for a restorative practices coordinator that serves a student body that is 87% low-income, 90% students of color, 45% English Language Learners (a proportion that continues to increase), and 27% students with disabilities. In 2010, the school was placed in turnaround status, which it came out of four years later. More recently, North High School has received recognition from Denver Public Schools and the state of Colorado for achieving high-growth status on state testing and the highest increase in graduation rates in the district.

Skinner Middle School

Skinner (SMS) is a neighborhood middle school that also participated in the pilot grant for school-based restorative justice coordinators. At the end of the grant, SMS began using site funds to continue implementing restorative practices school-wide. In 2008, Skinner was a neighborhood school serving 357 students: 90% were students of color, 87% were low-income, 10% were English Language Learners, and 16% had disabilities. Skinner's student population

> There needs to be a principal who has an eye for equity, relationship building and preventative practices…who dedicates people, time and money to make it happen.
>
> – Jason Sanders, current Hallett Principal, former Vice Principal

(463) continues to be mostly low income at 75%, with 74% students of color, 22% English Language Learners, and 16% special education participants. In 2008, Skinner was on watch according to the DPS School Performance Framework, but has continuously met district expectations since 2011.

Hallett Fundamental Academy

Hallett Fundamental Academy (HA) is an Early Childhood Education (ECE) through 5th grade magnet school that requires all parents to choice into the school as part of the enrollment process. HA began implementing restorative practices in 2010, during a time when 329 students attended the school: 87% were eligible for free and reduced lunch, 91% identified as youth of color, 12% were classified as English Language Learners, and 16% participated in special education. The student body (377) remains predominantly low-income at 91%, with 92% students of color, 14% English Language Learners, and 13% students with disabilities. For the past four years, HA has increasingly improved student achievement, moving from being on probation to meeting expectations according to the DPS School Performance Framework.

Data Collection

Interviews and focus groups with staff members from the three sites were conducted in the summer of 2015 to document their lessons learned in taking restorative practices school-wide. Principals were interviewed in pairs, during which they identified staff members who played a key role in the implementation of their school's discipline reforms. These individuals were subsequently invited by the research team to participate in a focus group. Interviews and focus groups were two-hour, semi-structured conversations guided by a protocol developed by the principal investigator and the DSBRJ leadership team. Participants included 21 staff members from the three schools, including principals, assistant principals, deans, restorative practice coordinators or paraprofessionals, social workers, psychologists, and the district coordinator of restorative practices.

ANALYSIS

Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and loaded into a qualitative data analysis software program called Dedoose. An inductive and deductive coding approach was employed; preliminary codes were generated from a literature review, with additional codes added as the research team read the transcriptions. Codes were assessed for inter-rater reliability across the two researchers, using Cohen's Kappa ($k > .80$).

RESULTS

Essential Strategies for School-Wide RP

Participants reported that a strong **principal vision and commitment** to restorative practices was the most essential strategy for building school-wide RP, followed by **staff buy-in, professional development,** and **a full-time RP Coordinator.** Principals at all three schools allocated funds from their site-based budget for full-time coordinators, dedicated extensive time for professional development on RP and allied approaches, and provided consistent messaging in staff meetings and coaching sessions about the importance of restorative approaches for academic and social-emotional learning.

Principal Vision and Commitment

Focus group and interview participants agreed that a threshold condition for success was a leader who understood that restorative practice represents a philosophy and not a program. Tim Turley, the district coordinator of Restorative Practices, observed, "Leadership has to be there…If I'm the principal and I don't have the commitment to it, it's not going to go anywhere." A middle school staff member was a bit more emphatic, stating, "You can't do anything without the principal, I'm sorry. You just can't." At the same time, participants felt that school leaders did not have to be actively engaged in using restorative approaches themselves, but needed to believe in the

> We were in a place where discipline was so overwhelming and conditions were such that we needed something different rather than just processing referrals and suspending kids. What we were doing wasn't working.
>
> – School Leader

strategy and communicate clear expectations of staff that "this is what we do" and it "isn't going anywhere."

Initially, school leaders looked to RP as an alternative to out-of-school suspension because they were inundated with student behavior problems, and found that exclusionary discipline practices were both ineffective and unfair. After suspending the same students over and over, they recognized that exclusionary approaches "don't change behavior" and their school was not safer, or more orderly, as a result. Instead, school leaders observed that suspension was often not in the best interests of anyone in the school community. Suspended students returned to school resentful, angry, and without any new social, emotional, or problem-solving skills that would prevent the same situation from reoccurring.

School leaders' interest in RP was also grounded in their commitment to equity, both in terms of ending racial disproportionalities in out-of-school suspension and expulsion and improving achievement among students of color. They believed RP would ultimately reduce achievement gaps by keeping students in the classroom and teaching students new conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills.

Staff Buy-In

Staff members' willingness to actively support and engage in discipline reforms was the second most important strategy for taking RP school-wide at Hallett, North, and Skinner. Across the three sites, when RP was introduced, "there was a lot of unhappiness from the staff, a lot of resistance to [new] philosophies about discipline." To generate buy-in, principals solicited staff feedback as reforms were implemented, listened to teachers' perspectives about needed supports, and followed through with professional development and coaching. School leaders regularly conveyed the message to staff that they weren't alone, "we are all in this together," everyone needs support to transform school discipline practices, and the transition would be challenging. Administrators also expressed empathy towards teachers who were resisting change and were frustrated by reforms, followed with practical support. Principals distributed leadership in the area of student discipline by creating multiple opportunities for stakeholders to drive policy or system development. Teachers, service providers, and community partners were all involved in the creation and ongoing evaluation of discipline policies and student behavior interventions. In most cases, staff members developed detailed guidelines for implementing restorative practices at their school site and then submitted these guidelines to administrators for approval. School leaders wanted their staff to feel "really safe to be really honest about what's working or what's not working" and have ownership of discipline protocols.

Evidence of the positive impact of RP on student behavior led to buy-in. A school leader observed, "After that first year [of implementing RPs] we saw such a huge drastic decline in suspensions…We also did a really good job of tracking repeat offenders and saw huge decline in that. And so after that one year, that kind of created that believer in me." This was especially true among very resistant staff members. The former RP coordinator from Skinner, Sandy Stone, observed, "I'm thinking of one teacher in particular [who] was basically forced to mediate several times. There finally came a time where there was like an awakening, the whole thing shifted, and she realized that it can be an extremely effective process. From that point out she was sold; she was one of my biggest supporters." Participants from all three sites observed that investment in RP, particularly among teachers, was created when school leaders relentlessly pursued their vision and student behavior started to improve as a result.

Professional Development

Ongoing training and coaching was used to increase staff members' familiarity with discipline policies and protocols and strengthen their capacity to support students' social and emotional needs. The most common topics of professional development were restorative practices (RP), site-specific discipline/

> From a classroom teacher's perspective, ultimately I want my students focused and ready to learn and feeling like a successful student. So if they've had a restorative conversation and they show that emotional piece has been taken care of and they're ready to move on, I'm good.
>
> – Christopher Martin, Skinner Middle School Science Teacher

student behavior policies and protocols (especially referral processes, discipline ladders or matrices, and available student support services), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), No Nonsense Nurturing (NNN), and culturally responsive instruction.

Professional development in these areas was consistent, ongoing, and relatively intensive. Most sites dedicated several days over the summer to provide differentiated training on student behavior and discipline, and then provided regular "booster" sessions throughout the year during faculty meetings, grade-level team meetings, or shared planning time. When individuals, or challenging situations, needed additional support, administrators provided on-call consultation, personal coaching, and individualized training opportunities. The goal was to surround school staff with resources in a parallel manner to the intensive supports offered to students.

Trainings were practical and hands-on, rather than didactic. The most helpful workshops involved the following components: time for reflection and feedback on systems and strategies; scenarios or case studies to illustrate key concepts; modeling of intervention approaches by experts; and opportunities to role play new skills. Most sites used a "train the trainer" model where building-level staff who received extensive training in a particular behavior management approach, or had taken leadership in developing or revising school discipline or behavior policies, led workshops for the rest of the school community.

Finally, professional development on RP was provided to all staff who interacted with students, not just teachers and disciplinarians, but also front-office staff, paraprofessionals, lunchroom workers, custodians, and bus drivers. Involving all of these folks in the training, "increased the probably of support if that whole building has the mindset of restorative approaches."

Full-Time Coordinator

It was simply not feasible, or sustainable, to train existing administrators or mental health staff and ask them to take on RP in addition to their existing responsibilities. In part, the need for a RP coordinator reflects the time-intensive and relational nature of this approach as an alternative to exclusionary practices like suspension and expulsion. Joseph Walden, the social worker at Skinner, observed, "the thing that people need to understand about the RA process is that it's it doesn't take any time to suspend a kid. But because the RA process is about relationships, it is labor intensive."

All participants in the study agreed that at least one, full-time coordinator of restorative practices was necessary to bring this approach school-wide in schools that ranged in size from approximately 300–1000 students. This person's responsibilities usually included building relationships with students throughout the school, facilitating formal conferences or mediations, following up on repair agreements, and providing training or coaching to staff.

To fund these positions, principals often had to make difficult choices and prioritize supports for student behavior over other resources, such as electives. The former principal at Hallett, Charmaine Keeton, explained, "I think art and music is great too, but I got to take care of that heart first, so I had to make hard decisions about cutting certain programs."

Discipline Policies and Processes

School leaders recognized that the decision to end their reliance on out-of-school suspensions as their primary discipline approach was not an end in and of itself. Charmaine Keeton, former principal at Hallet shared that, "you really do have to make a conscious decision that you're not going to suspend kids, but you've also got to say if I don't suspend them, what am I going to do to support them? You can't put them in another room; you can't sit them in the corner. You have to have something in place that's going to help

> If we look back, schools that have hired full-time coordinators have the most success [because] you need some time to do it. So if I'm going to do a conference between three or four kids who are in opposition to each other, I've got to pre-conference, I've got to spend time finding out what the problem is. If you rely on administrators, they're going to do it in an almost assembly-line fashion and you don't want to that. You've got to have that personal relationship. That's something coordinators can do. Coordinators can circulate during lunch duty; they can be in the hallways and all over the place forming relationships, and that's what makes the difference.
>
> – Tim Turley, DPS District Coordinator of Restorative Practices

them get back to class." Each school engaged in a lengthy process of developing new discipline systems and policies, often captured in their school's "code of conduct" or "prevention and intervention manuals." In most cases, these documents were developed by staff members with restorative approaches as the core value underlying the process, then approved by the principal.

School-Wide Expectations and Relationships

Schools first defined common, school-wide expectations for student behavior, often using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) approaches. Teachers explicitly taught and modeled these expectations to students, usually during the first weeks of school. Several schools also required that teachers spend the beginning of the school year focused on relationship building, before turning to instructional content.

Schools also disseminated behavioral expectations, or their code of conduct, to students and families through assemblies, the student agenda or handbook, parent meetings, and registration.

Transparent Intervention and Discipline Protocols

All of the participating schools provided multi-level tiers of student support with a heavy emphasis on universal approaches. They utilized universal rewards systems, social emotional learning curricula, and culturally responsive instruction to prevent misbehavior and improve school culture. Sites had detailed and specific processes to follow when students did not meet school-wide expectations, depending on the severity and frequency of the misbehavior. Possible responses to low-level rule breaking (e.g. disruption, defiance, disrespect) included a restorative dialogue or peace circle, a reflection or refocus opportunity for the student, time in a buddy classroom, calls or visits home to caregivers to collaboratively problem solve, and/or referrals to support services. In general, the expectation was that teachers first build relationships, allow for mistakes, repair the damage, and connect students to counseling, skill groups, and/or the behavior intervention team before making an office discipline referral.

Only repeated, or habitual, minor behaviors were referred to disciplinarians, after classroom-based interventions had been attempted and documented. Major behaviors that warranted an automatic office discipline referral included drug possession, serious assault, weapons possession, and highly disruptive behaviors that interfered with the delivery of instruction to other students. Exceptions to this protocol were made when teachers or students were at their limit and were not emotionally ready to

> We've always tried to support teachers with strategies, practice, role plays, and [guidance about] how your first few weeks should look with rituals, routines, and relationships. That's how to build a strong foundation.
>
> – Danielle Harris, former School Culture Lead and ECE Teacher at Hallett

> I think the most powerful and positive expulsion hearing that I was ever part of was this year. Tim Turley facilitated it using the [restorative practices] sequence of questioning. And there were a lot of tears among the staff, the kid, and the parent. It allowed for a very genuine conversation. Using the steps of [the district discipline] ladder, expulsion would have been a no-brainer, but we didn't expel her. Which was a very, very poignant turning point for this young woman's future because she went through the process. She knew what she had done wrong to the community. She took responsibility for it and wanted to make it right. It didn't make sense in the end to lay down that final punishment and say well you did this so you're expelled.
>
> – School Leader

engage in a restorative dialogue or other classroom-based intervention. There were occasions when teachers and students needed a short break from each other in order to calm down and restore their composure. Charmaine Keeton, the former principal of Hallett explained, "Sometimes we do need breaks from kids. I'm not going to hold that against [teachers] because I understand that." Behavior team members repeatedly expressed empathy about how much classroom teachers have on their plates. They viewed the behavior interventionist, restorative practice coordinator, or disciplinarian as being responsible for helping students and teachers access needed supports and develop new social emotional or conflict-resolution skills.

Once an office disciplinary referral was made, school administrators first attempted to engage the student in a restorative dialogue to understand the context of the discipline incident and the young person's willingness to accept responsibility. Most administrators then reviewed the offending student's discipline or behavior files to: 1) determine if teachers already tried classroom-based interventions and/or caregiver contact, 2) assess whether the misbehavior was an isolated incident or reflected a pattern, and 3) evaluate whether any environmental factors may be triggers (e.g. transition times, always the same teacher/classroom, playground dynamics between 4th and 5th graders). The severity and frequency of misbehavior were identified as the main factors taken into account when deciding consequences, but participants acknowledged that decisions about resolutions were highly individualized. Even in response to relatively serious or habitual problem behavior, the three sites usually held a restorative conference to determine the root cause of the misbehavior and what offending students thought they could do to repair the harm they caused. Disciplinarians often considered which adult in the building had the best relationship with a particular student when choosing the facilitator of a restorative mediation. Alternative, or complementary, discipline consequences included (in order of prevalence): Saturday school, after-school detention, and community service. Out-of-school suspension was considered by all three sites to be a last resort, except in cases where district policy mandated a suspension, such as drug distribution.

Accountability

School leaders held staff members accountable to new discipline policies and systems in a variety of ways. First, if a student was referred for habitual low-level discipline incidents, but there was no documentation in the district data management system that classroom-based interventions had been delivered, administrators often sent students back to the classroom and waited to process the incident until they spoke with or emailed the instructor. A principal noted, "the teachers who didn't initiate, document, or have evidence of their work, [their] students went right back." Accountability to classroom-based interventions was critical to meeting the goal of keeping students in class and learning, along with maintaining the teacher's authority. Jessica Hale, Student Advisor at SMS, explained, "students can't be accountable just to [administrators]; they also need to be accountable to the classroom teachers."

Other strategies to help staff invest in a school-wide restorative approach to discipline included individual accountability check-ins, coaching sessions, and reminders. Schools had posters in classrooms, hallways and offices, providing an overview of the schools' discipline protocol and listed questions that guide a restorative conversation or dialogue:

> Our administrators have gotten really good at making sure teachers follow the discipline ladder, because the important thing about being restorative is building those relationships with kids…I would often hear [the dean] say to teachers who wanted this kid out of their class, "Maybe you guys need a break from each other, but after that what are you going to do to rebuild that relationship?" Our discipline team is really good about encouraging teachers to remember what the [code of conduct] says about RA in the classroom. Sometimes they need to be reminded.
>
> – Sandy Stone, former RP Coordinator at Skinner Middle School

"What happened? What's going on? How do you feel about it? Who is affected? Who is responsible for what? How will the harm be repaired?" Examples and recommendations were also sent through staff newsletters or bulletins and daily announcements.

Data

Discipline and behavioral data was primarily a focus in the early years of each school's discipline reform implementation. The district's student information system *(Infinite Campus)* was used by school staff to document and review intervention efforts, learn about a young person's behavior history at other schools, and assess the effectiveness of discipline reforms. Few schools collected or analyzed data on their office discipline referrals, but used the instructional conference and behavior management tabs of *Infinite Campus* to document classroom-based interventions and track serious incidents that lead to in- or out-of-school suspension as a consequence, respectively. However, participants felt that personal and individual knowledge of a misbehaving child, gained through relationship building, was even more important than the type of information held in *Infinite Campus*.

All three sites expressed interest in a new data system that would allow them to track and monitor the use of restorative interventions without entering information into the behavior management tab of *Infinite Campus*. Participants felt that data entry into that tab should be reserved for the documentation of serious discipline incidents that would become a part of a student's permanent record, and situations where the discipline consequence affected students' attendance, like a suspension. Some administrators expressed reluctance to enter data into the behavior management tab because they felt it would stigmatize or label the student and could be used against the young person in the future. For example, during a conversation about data entry, a focus group participant commented that a referral in the behavior management tab is "not negative per se" and usually involves connecting a student to support services. The former Dean at North High School, Tracy Allgeier, responded, "But if we put 15 referrals in a kid's behavior tab, [even when there were] positive outcomes of RA and that student had been proactive in seeking out RA, that's a negative connotation for someone else getting that behavior file." Participants were interested in an alternative tab in *Infinite Campus* where they could enter information about the timing, participants, and focus of common restorative approaches, such as pre-conferencing, mediations or conferences, suspension reintegration meetings, dialogues, affective statements, peace circles, and agreements to repair harm; in other words, the "who, what, when, where, and why, along with the outcomes of restorative approaches."

Many participants would like to increase their use of data now that strong implementation systems are in place and there is more capacity for data entry

> There is no kid whose circumstances are unknown to the team. Everyone owns all those kids and all their information.
>
> – Jessica Hale, Student Advisor at Skinner Middle School

> I think that it really is important to be able to [be seen as an authority and also a source of support] so that a student can build that trust with you. They know that you are going to help them see the solution. And you to have to be able to say, you know, in this situation this is what happens. We can still repair this, we can still work on this, but there is a consequence to this behavior.
>
> – Carol Tisdale, Student Success Coordinator at North High School

and analysis. Jessica Hale, Student Advisor at SMS shared that, "We want to see how many minutes students are losing instruction, how often RA changes the behavior, when kids are coming from the same teacher consistently, what times of day is something happening, is it happening in a particular class with a particular person, you know those kinds of things." School staff members were interested in using this data to inform professional development opportunities and discipline policy or protocol changes.

Staffing and Communication

Characteristics and Qualifications

Participants were asked to identify the essential qualifications staff members, in particular RP coordinators, need to be successful. Universally, participants reported that relationship-building skills, with students, families and colleagues, were most critical. Specific qualities related to relationship building that were mentioned multiple times included consistency, empathy, active listening, patience, and the ability to be firm and straightforward. Participants emphasized that staff with strong relationship skills were not just "nice;" they showed students compassion, but also had high expectations for acceptable behavior and held students accountable for their actions. The following observation by Tim Turley, the district RP coordinator, was typical , "Somebody that can relate to the kids. Somebody that has a caring, loving attitude, somebody who can express 'this is acceptable, this isn't.' [If] you have a relationship, the kids will listen." Experience working in similar neighborhoods and awareness of students' lived realities outside of school were also deemed essential.

These "soft" skills were viewed as more important than specific knowledge of restorative practices, which participants felt could be learned through professional development. For example, in a focus group the former RP coordinator from SMS described her colleagues who had less success at their sites, "There were several coordinators that were far more knowledgeable and experienced in restorative practices and theories; however, my success was attributed to my ability to relate to students and make connections." Participants also observed that a staff member's relationship-building skills need to be supported with time to be visible outside the classroom or the disciplinary office and interact with students in positive ways. Lunch duty, greeting students in the morning, "mini conversations during passing period," positive calls home, and public recognition of student success were provided as examples.

Other staff characteristics (in order of frequency mentioned) included: commitment to, and belief in, the restorative philosophy, a team mentality, high expectations for student behavior, openness to feedback and professional development opportunities, and a strong belief in students' capacity to learn (e.g. growth mindset). Of note, participants did not feel it was necessary for new hires to be familiar with the specific language of restorative practice, but they needed to be able to articulate similar values and describe practices that are aligned with the philosophy.

School leaders emphasized these qualities in their hiring practices of all school staff, not just RP coordinators. Across all three sites, administrators explicitly asked job applicants (teachers and support staff) interview questions about their approach to relationship building, behavior management, and their beliefs about disadvantaged students' abilities to learn.

> We have lots of different people with different focuses but still work towards that same goal. Collaboratively working together on keeping kids in class and making sure they're socio-emotionally well and successful academically. Every person has their different perspective and different lens, and different focus of their work but they're probably all stronger at their work because they work together.
>
> – School Leader

Interdisciplinary Team Meetings

Each school had an interdisciplinary student behavior team that tried to meet regularly. These groups had different titles at each site, but their emphasis was on student support, not discipline per se. They often relied on the leadership of a RP "champion;" someone who had a passion for creating a positive school culture using restorative practices. There was consensus among focus group and interview participants that the behavior team should include at least one staff member from the following three areas: restorative practices, administration of student discipline, and mental health or social emotional support (e.g. the RP coordinator, dean, student advisor or Assistant Principal, and school social worker, psychologist or behavior interventionist). Participants recommended that representatives from this group regularly attend grade-level team meetings and the overall school leadership team to ensure communication with teachers and administrators. Over time, as restorative approaches scaled up and spread to different domains of the school, sites included additional staff members on the team, particularly those involved in the delivery of behavioral interventions or staff members with strong student relationships, such as school counselors, front office staff, teachers, special educators, family liaisons, behavior-focused paraprofessionals, community partners, and occasionally parents and students.

Although there was no consistency across the three sites regarding the number or frequency of meetings among the core behavior team, participants recommended that meetings take place at least once a week to review cases, determine interventions, monitor progress, and identify action steps. These meetings were difficult to organize, but critically important for implementation fidelity. Moreover, they served an important source of support for adults in the building. The following quote from James Doran, Dean of Students at Skinner Middle provides a summary of this theme, "All of us that are working with the behaviors, especially teachers, there comes some frustration from dealing with this over and over. That's when the teacher feels like 'I want this child removed.' I think that comes from a sense [of being alone]. And I would probably struggle more if I didn't have the support staff to lean on. We get really, really busy; like really busy. [But] It seems like when we meet, and we discuss, we strategize, we get a sense like, we're not on an island. When we make the time it seems like we were a lot more settled and unified."

Beyond specific staff structures, participants from all three sites highlighted the importance of team work, communication, flexibility, and valuing each other's strengths. In response to a prompt about the school's decision-making and reporting protocols, a principal remarked, "[the question] kind of makes me laugh because its more about collaboration in that team structure. It happens so seamlessly because we work so closely together all the time." Similarly, an elementary school staff member observed, "we are all a team supporting, even if it's your student or not. Everyone's input and ideas are put out there on the table and taken into consideration." The former middle school RP coordinator at Skinner, Sandy Stone, also echoed this sentiment, "I don't feel like any of our roles are black and white, they're all grey you know? We all just kind of help each other out. It's a team effort."

District Supports

Most participants found professional development opportunities and on-call consultation to be the most helpful supports from the school district, particularly when led by individuals who have credibility from

> The district offered restorative approaches and a fairly intensive training. It was two days, with a great deal of expertise. Right off the bat, you were hands-on with lots of role playing, lots of modeling, lots of challenging your own biases, your own practices, your own belief systems. Then you were given the tools to go out. We also had someone that we could go to and ask for help. That first year we had a pretty substantial situation where we had one kid who was beaten by a bunch of other kids. At that level, it's like I've been trained but I'm not at the level I need to be. So we told Tim Turley we need your help and he was here immediately. They helped facilitate it so we could see the practice in a really intense situation. We saw parents involved, we saw students involved, and we saw a resolution, which was tremendous. A lot of resentment can be held, right, a lot of anger, a lot of frustration, but we were able to get it resolved through that district level support. So the training itself, and then the ongoing support on site whenever we needed it helped [us] become very proficient at restorative practices.
>
> – School mental health provider

a history of using relevant strategies with low-income students of color. District-provided trainings on restorative approaches, culturally responsive instruction, PBIS, and No-Nonsense Nurturing were also repeatedly mentioned as useful resources, particularly when they were delivered at the school site. Schools felt supported by the district's discipline policy being grounded in RP, and encouraged by the general push to lower suspension and expulsion rates.

With respect to needed district supports, most participants felt schools would be more successful if the district provided long-term funds to hire restorative practice coordinators and paraprofessionals. The former HA Principal, Charmaine Keeton, observed, "Eventually, maybe you do wean off of [district support for a new position.] But at the beginning it needs to be a three-year investment. It can't be a one-year investment. You know, change doesn't come quick; you need to invest the time and energy in the position." Another area of need was for the district to provide regular meetings and support for restorative practice coordinators and para-professionals. Finally, participants expressed that site-based trainings and consultations were more helpful than district-wide professional development units.

National Education Association

National Education Association
1201 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036-3290
nea.org

This document has been printed by Organized Staff Union Labor at the National Education Association

19205.0116.ec