A Restorative Approach to School Discipline: Strengthening Relationships and Accountability to Support All Students

A restorative approach to school discipline creates supportive environments where all students can succeed. Persistent racial, ethnic, and gender disparities in school discipline—both in Connecticut and nationally—underscore the need for more equitable approaches to managing student behavior and conflict. Restorative practices, broadly defined as "the science of relationships and community," offer a powerful alternative by promoting accountability, healing, and inclusion through a continuum of tools grounded in principles of justice and equity. Rooted in Indigenous peacemaking traditions, restorative approaches emphasize community values and collective healing.[1]

Beginning in July 2025, Public Act 23–167[2] requires regional and local boards of education in Connecticut to adopt and implement policy to respond to nonviolent school discipline incidents using restorative practices. This provides school districts with a significant opportunity to advance long-needed changes to transform schools into nurturing communities that are committed to equity, diversity, and anti-racism. Schools that prioritize exclusionary discipline approaches, which remove students from the educational setting, over

restorative practices, which build relationships and accountability, often perpetuate disparities, particularly among boys, students of color, and students with disabilities. **This issue brief provides guidance for implementing a restorative practices framework in school and district disciplinary approaches, offering practical tools and models to help schools respond to behavioral challenges, while preparing to meet the requirements of Public Act 23–167.**

Defining Restorative Practices is Critical for Successful Implementation

Strengthening implementation of restorative practices can help to narrow or eliminate existing achievement gaps and result in better and more equitable outcomes for all children. Despite a growing evidence base to support the use of restorative practices in promoting positive behavioral and academic outcomes for students, schools struggle to effectively train and support staff and school leaders to implement these skills in a structured and consistent way. While research on restorative practices in schools has grown in recent years, it has failed to keep pace with the uptake of restorative practice

implementation across school-based settings over the last two decades. A systematic review of published studies since 2000[3] found that a) restorative practices are inconsistently defined, b) fidelity widely varies due to a lack of implementation support and quality improvement activities, and c) there is limited high quality research. The concepts and specific tools or skills included within the

continuum of restorative practice vary considerably and can be overlapping, complex, and vague, resulting in challenges for schools to incorporate them into policy and practice. Table 1 provides examples of various definitions and key components related to restorative practice approaches used by schools.

Table 1: Key Components of Restorative Practice Models

Model	Description	Key Components	Purpose
Community Building[4]	Tools and strategies to foster relationships among students and staff.	Universal supports, circle processes for relationship-building	To create a supportive and inclusive school climate.
Restorative Language[5]	Use of specific language that promotes empathy, accountability, reflection, and understanding.	Affective/ "I" statements, restorative questions, guided discussion	To encourage positive communication, self-awareness, and reflection.
Listening Circles[6]	A structured process that brings together affected individuals to discuss harm and healing.	Talking piece tool to facilitate turn-taking, open dialogue, consensus-building	To facilitate open dialogue and build community.
Peer Mediation[7]	Trained student mediators help peers resolve conflicts through guided discussions.	Neutral facilitators, confidentiality, collaborative problem-solving	To empower students and develop conflict resolution skills.
Restorative Conferences[8]	Formal meetings between affected parties to discuss the harm caused and agree on a plan for repair.	Facilitated dialogue, participation of those harmed and those responsible for harm, action plan	To promote accountability and healing for all parties involved.
Classroom Restorative Practices[9]	Integration of restorative principles within classroom management, social and emotional learning curricula, and community-building efforts.	Restorative language, community agreements, reflective practices	To create a sense of belonging and inclusiveness to ensure that all voices are heard.
Restorative Discipline[10]	An approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm and restoring relationships rather than punishment.	Accountability, reflection, community involvement, action planning	To promote responsibility and restorative action.
Restorative Justice[11]	A broader framework often applied beyond schools, focusing on healing and community restoration after wrongdoing.	Inclusivity, dialogue, community support	To support the victim, hold the offender accountable, and to restore the community
Community Circles[12]	Gatherings designed to strengthen community bonds and support relationships among students, staff, and families.	Open sharing, active listening, collective responsibility	To promote safety and collective healing

A continuum of "informal" to "formal" practices (see Figure 1) has been defined by the International Institute for Restorative Practices and is often used to further organize restorative principles and tools. The Figure below expands on this continuum with definitions and examples. Generally, informal practices are skills that can be implemented in the moment with minimal training or resources, while formal practices often require more planning, preparation, or structure. Affective statements and affective questions can help guide conversations focused on emotional awareness. Brief impromptu conversations facilitate conflict resolution and open communication to address and repair harm in real time.

Figure 1: Restorative Practices Continuum

	Informal				Formal
	Affective statements	**Affective questions**	**Small impromptu conversations**	**Circle**	**Formal conference**
Definition	A statement that expresses feelings	A question that elicits expression of emotion, attitude, or values	Quick conversation to address the problem behavior and expectations	Group process designed to teach inclusively and build community	Formal process to bring together everyone involved/ impacted by an incident
Example	I felt frustrated when you came to class without your book again.	How did that make you feel?	Brief dialogue between a teacher and student immediately following a classroom incident	Take turns giving everyone an opportunity to engage in dialogue	Facilitated discussion to process what happened, who was impacted, and decide how to make it right

Restorative Practices Improve Equity Among Students

Rooted in Indigenous practices across cultures, restorative justice practices began to appear in the American criminal justice system in the 1970s, but failed to address the impact of race relations and racism within the institution in the early years.[2] As these practices have more recently been integrated into modern legal, school, and community-based settings, the importance of inclusive and intentional approaches to specifically support frequently marginalized people has grown. Suspensions and expulsions remain a widely utilized approach to school discipline, and African American, Latino, and American Indian students are more likely to receive exclusionary discipline, which has been found to negatively impact their academic achievement.[14] In 2017–2018, boys of nearly all races were disproportionately disciplined compared to girls, but Black boys in pre-k through 12th grade showed the largest disparity across racial groups, with an out-of-school suspension rate of 24.9%, despite only making up 7.7% of enrollment, according to the U.S Department of Education.[15]

Restorative practices prioritize repairing harm, building relationships, developing strong classroom community, and addressing the underlying causes of behavior, rather than simply punishing students. When used as an alternative to punitive practices like suspension it gives students and staff an opportunity to talk, ask questions and process conflicts, while still holding the student accountable for inappropriate behaviors. In more serious incidents, restorative practices may be used in addition to formal disciplinary or legal actions to repair harm and build accountability. When schools implement restorative practices with consistency, they experience improved academic outcomes, increased student engagement and motivation, reduction in behavioral problems, improved school climate, and enhanced social-emotional learning.[16, 17]

For example, a 2018 analysis of Los Angeles Unified School District's discipline records following the implementation of restorative programming in the 2014–15 school year demonstrates that suspension rates for misconduct dropped for students from all measured demographic groups (Black, Latino, Asian, and White race/ethnicity; students with disabilities; English learner students; and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch).[18] The analysis also indicates that even though discipline gaps related to race and disability status persisted, those gaps had narrowed considerably. The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) and other interventionists have been instrumental in spreading this proactive and preventative approach across U.S. settings.[19]

Restorative practices recognize that each person has different experiences and needs. Unlike traditional exclusionary discipline policies, which rely heavily on rubrics which purport to be "fair," restorative-based approaches view each behavioral situation independently, separating the deed from the doer and working to identify the unique context that led to the behavior. A restorative approach means consequences must be individualized and appropriate for the situation. The tools that make up a restorative approach to school climate and culture allow for student and teacher needs to be identified and met, which equity requires. Restorative practices can also be used to address oppression among various groups (racism, sexism, heterosexism, antisemitism, etc.) when incidents happen in schools, though more research is needed to understand the impact of this work in school settings.[4]

Looking Ahead to Successful Implementation in Connecticut

As Connecticut legislation PA 23-167[3] takes effect on July 1, 2025, regional and local boards of education will be required to "adopt a restorative practices response policy to be implemented by school employees for incidents of challenging behavior or student conflict that is nonviolent and does not constitute a crime. Such policy shall not include the involvement of a school resource officer or other law enforcement official, unless such challenging behavior or conflict escalates to violence or constitutes a crime." As school leaders

prepare to implement this statute, they will need to clearly define challenging behaviors to be addressed restoratively, skills and practices for responding to behaviors, staff and student responsibilities for implementing the policy including professional development and training support, and efforts to monitor and track implementation and outcomes across schools.

Schools looking to implement restorative practices would benefit from an examination of the barriers to implementation of restorative approaches (e.g., limited time in the daily schedule, mandated testing requirements, lack of functional physical space, staff buy-in) to gauge readiness and needs for incorporating this work into their everyday practice. According to experienced practitioners,[20, 21] considerable time and resources are required to understand a school or district's core beliefs and values before implementing a restorative program.

Many schools lack a comprehensive and structured framework and supports to hold students and staff accountable for challenging behaviors and default to exclusionary practices, yet they often have pieces in place on which to build. For example, they may have existing school climate and culture teams that meet to review student discipline and interventions, structures for professional development training and implementation support to staff, a Multi-Tiered System of Support for tiered intervention, a school climate policy and expectations for positive behavior, existing school-family-community partnerships, and they have some policy and process in place to identify and respond to challenging behaviors. Schools can ensure each of these elements of their approach to student discipline includes restorative language and process, targeted professional development training and practice sessions for staff to implement restorative practices into daily activities, targeted strategies to improve equity, and a method to document these practices and successes in preventing and de-escalating behavior incidents to show positive outcomes.[22] By assessing their existing strengths and capacity and building on current structures, restorative practice implementation can be more cost-efficient and sustainable.

Resources are available to help schools access training and support to implement restorative practices in Connecticut. For example, restorative practices are a key component of the **School-Based Diversion Initiative (SBDI)**. CHDI, in partnership with the Town Youth Justice Institute (TYJI) at the University of New Haven,

helps schools implement restorative practices to reduce exclusionary discipline and connect students to behavioral health services and supports. TYJI also hosts an online resource and training **directory** to access restorative practitioners and research.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The following recommendations are provided to help prepare and guide schools to implement restorative practices that promote equity, repair harm, reduce exclusionary discipline, and ensure accountability for behavioral concerns in schools.

1. Schools should ensure that policies designed to expand the use of restorative practices **utilize evidence-based guidance for identifying recommended restorative practices components and strategies t**o guide planning and implementation (e.g., see Table 1).

    A. Before implementing restorative practices, schools should **determine readiness** by assessing staff attitudes, skills, and policies that facilitate successful implementation.

    B. **Schools should require collection and monitoring of discipline data and use of restorative practice tools for ongoing quality assurance, and provide the necessary time and support for staff** to integrate restorative practices in classrooms and school-level activities.

    C. School-level policy should **identify a continuum of informal and formal practices** to consistently address a range of behaviors and incidents.

2. Schools should implement and monitor restorative practices in a manner **that intentionally addresses disparities across racial, ethnic, and gender groups.**

    A. Schools should **routinely collect and monitor discipline data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender** to assess disparities and to ensure equity in the discipline process, as well as to track changes in disparities over time.

3. Districts should require professional development for staff and administrators in schools on restorative practices concepts and skills to help facilitate policy implementation.

    A. State level policy should be accompanied by offering districts practical implementation supports such as **resource guides and consultation from restorative practitioners who can support training and implementation** among schools.

    B. A **state-level evaluation across districts** should be conducted to monitor implementation of restorative policies and practices and to assess resulting changes in outcomes (e.g. discipline rates, attendance, academic achievement, school climate) over time.

This Issue Brief was prepared by Jeana Bracey, PhD, (CHDI), Yecenia Casiano, MS, (CHDI), and restorative justice trainer and facilitator Kris Wraight, MS. For more information, contact jbracey@chdi.org, klwraight@icloud.com, or visit www.chdi.org.

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