Restorative approaches to addressing student behaviors

What are restorative school practices?

Restorative school practices are designed to help staff approach and manage student behavior in ways that work to create an inclusive and equitable school climate and community. Stemming from traditional indigenous justice systems, the driving assumption behind restorative approaches is that conflict and misbehavior cause harm to others and disturb the peace of a community, rather than just being considered a violation of a rule or law. A hallmark of restorative approaches to conflict and problem behavior is the involvement of all those involved in/impacted by the issue or problem, and providing opportunities for everyone to share their perspective of what occurred, how it impacted those involved, and their feelings, opinions, and proposed solutions. The intended outcome of the restorative approach is the repair of harmed relationships, in turn supporting core social-emotional competencies of self-awareness, empathy, communication skills, responsible decision-making, relationship building, and conflict resolution.

The core features of restorative school approaches include:

Restorative mindset

- Trust in relationships defines community
- Community members are responsible to and for each other
- Multiple perspectives/voices are critical, encouraged, and equally valued
- The restoration of community after conflict requires healing
- Those responsible for harm must be held accountable and actively repair harm
- Honest dialogue and collaborative problem-solving resolve conflict, with attention to root causes and needs of all involved

Restorative language

- Empathic listening: listening to the feelings, thoughts, and needs of others with an active effort to understand without judgement
- "I" statements: acknowledgment and ownership of one's own thoughts and feelings
- Restorative questions: questions that prompt one to consider the feelings of others, impact of their actions, and solutions for repairing harm

What types of restorative school practices can we use?

Common restorative school practices include:

Restorative conversations

Formal or informal, non-chastising one-on-one conversations that utilize restorative questions, "I" statements, and empathic listening. The goal is to identify the root causes of behavior, identify the responsibility of the harm-doer, encourage recognition of the impact of their actions, and problem-solve how to repair relationships.

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Circles

There are two common types of circles:

1. Talking circles, used proactively to get to know students/staff, talk about school issues, make plans, celebrate successes/good news, problem-solve, and grieve or heal

2. Peace circles, used to address conflict and harm with all involved parties with the goal of new agreements and harm repair to resolve conflict/disciplinary issues

Peer conferences

Also known as peer mediation, this voluntary approach utilizes trained peers to help a harm-doer recognize the impact of their actions and brainstorm solutions to repairing situations and relationships.

Classroom practices

Informal or structured, restorative classroom practices including relational approaches to managing student behavior and the classroom environment; can include simple interactions between teacher and students, daily rituals, talking circles, and all of the above restorative practices.

Re-entry procedures

Practices that support the school community in welcoming back students who have been removed from the community/classroom after more serious incidents.

How do restorative practices fit within MTSS-B?

Restorative practices should be integrated along the tiered MTSS-B framework. Tier 1 should include a focus on the development of a restorative, safe, and welcoming school climate, including positive relationships among all school community members and support for development of social-emotional competencies. At Tier 2, students involved in conflict and disciplinary events can participate in restorative conversations, conferences, and circles that uncover the root causes of problems and promote healing. At Tier 3, the community welcomes students back to the community who have been removed after severe incidents, with one-on-one interventions as needed.

How can we assess our restorative school practices?

Like with any MTSS-B practice, it's important to assess the fidelity with which your restorative school practices are being implemented over time. The Chicago Public Schools Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit offers a comprehensive implementation rubric that allows for ongoing self-assessment of your restorative practice systems and structures, professional development, school community and environment, and restorative interventions. The tool is available at https://blog.cps.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CPS_RP_Booklet.pdf.

Additional resources

- The Chicago Public Schools Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit available at https://blog.cps.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/CPS_RP_Booklet.pdf offers a comprehensive guide to integrating restorative school practices into a tiered prevention framework (MTSS) system, including a self-assessment fidelity guide to implementation.

- The School-Wide Restorative Practices: Step by Step resource from the Denver School-Based Restorative Practices Partnership (available at https://rjpartnership.org/resources/) offers detailed readiness, preparation, and trouble-shooting considerations when implementing a restorative school practices system.

- Implementing restorative justice: A guide for schools from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority (available at http://www.icjia.state.il.us/assets/pdf/BARJ/SCHOOL BARJ GUIDEBOOOK.pdf) offers an overview of core restorative school practices and considerations for training.

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