

## Restorative Practices and SEL Alignment

Written in collaboration with partners at [International Institute for Restorative Practices \(IIRP\)](#)

This tool is intended to assist educators in:

1. [Understanding the connection between social and emotional learning \(SEL\) and restorative practices \(RP\).](#)
2. [Understanding how RP provides opportunities to develop, practice, and reinforce SEL competencies.](#)
3. [Implementing SEL and RP together using the following schoolwide strategies:](#)
  - a. Align under a single initiative
  - b. Integrate preventive practices into all aspects of a school
  - c. Establish restorative responses to behavior that promote SEL
  - d. Develop mutually reinforcing RP and SEL skills and mindsets among staff and students
  - e. Involve students, families, and community partners in SEL and RP initiatives

### How are Restorative Practices and Social and Emotional Learning Connected?

Both social and emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices (RP) are used to systematically and intentionally build equitable learning environments in schools. While differing in their approaches, they share many common characteristics ([see figure A](#)). RP and SEL are both used to improve school climate by strengthening student-to-student, staff-to-staff, and student-to-staff relationships (Augustine et al., 2016; Brown, 2017; Cavanagh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). High-quality SEL programming has a strong evidence base demonstrating significant improvements in academics, social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2018). The research around restorative practice programs is still developing but qualitative reviews and early research suggests it may contribute to reductions in discipline rates and potential improvements to

### What are Restorative Practices?

Restorative practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as develop social connections within communities. In schools, restorative practices help to create a trusting environment by giving both students and adults an opportunity to make positive choices and interact respectfully in the classroom and throughout the school.

Restorative practices occur on a continuum from informal to formal and are used both proactively, to build healthy relationships and community, and/or responsively, to respond to conflict and wrongdoing.

#### RESTORATIVE PRACTICES CONTINUUM



*Restorative Practices Handbook (IIRP, 2019)*

**Proactive practices:** *practices that proactively build healthy relationships and develop community*

- [Affective language](#) (e.g., “I statements,” empathetic listening, affective questions, nonverbal affirmation)
- Small impromptu conversations or “restorative chats”
- Community-building [circles](#) (e.g., talking circles)

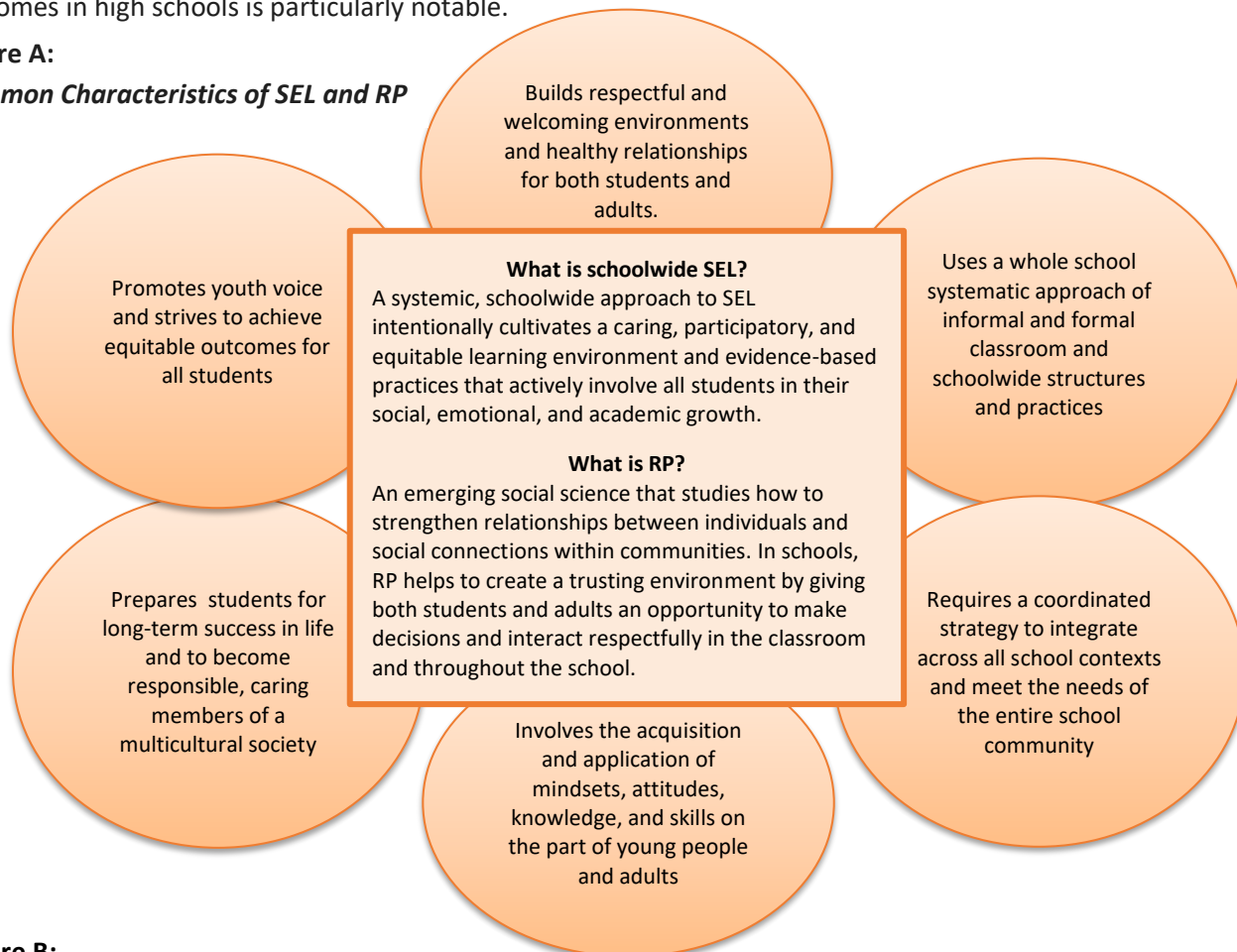
**Responsive practices:** *practices that respond to conflict and wrongdoing with the goal of repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and restoring community. Responsive practices involve both the person who caused harm and those who are impacted.*

- Responsive conversations or [restorative conferences](#)
- Responsive [circles](#) (e.g. restorative problem-solving, peace circles, and reintegration circles)
- Peer-based conferences, peer juries, justice panels

**For more on restorative practices, [visit the IIRP website.](#)**

school climate (Fronius et al., 2019). RP and SEL can be implemented together to support aligned goals and enhance outcomes, such as improved school or classroom climate, improved attendance and engagement, reductions in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions, and reduced disproportionality in discipline. Given the alignment of RP to key objectives of SEL in secondary settings (see [figure B](#)), the prospect of positive outcomes in high schools is particularly notable.

**Figure A:**  
**Common Characteristics of SEL and RP**



**Figure B:**  
**Alignment of Typical Objectives for SEL and RP in Secondary Settings**

	Support SEL Competencies for Adults & Students	Improve School & Classroom Climates & Strengthen Relationships	Affirm Culture & Identity; Promote Equity	Elevate Youth Voice & Engagement	Prepare Students for Transitions to College, Career, & Civic Life
SEL	Frequent and consistent opportunities for students and adults to cultivate, practice, reflect on, and reinforce SEL competencies.	Schoolwide and classroom learning environments that promote SEL are student-centered, respectful, supportive, and focused on building relationships and community.	SEL helps to make both students and adults feel respected, valued, and affirmed in their individual interests, talents, social identities, cultural values, and backgrounds.	When staff honor and elevate a broad range of student perspectives and experiences, students become engaged as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers.	SEL provides students with a solid foundation of skills for achieving success in postsecondary environments and in the workplace.
RP	While some practices emphasize different skills, the five SEL competencies can be taught and reinforced by implementing the full range of both proactive and responsive RP.	By working together toward shared goals and addressing challenging situations, RP helps to facilitate successful interpersonal interactions and create a sense of community.	By focusing on creating spaces where students and adults feel respected, valued, and safe, RP helps to create equitable learning environments.	RP provides students with structures to support the skills that promote student agency, thereby giving students voice and choice in how they learn.	RP provides students with transferable and essential skills, such as teamwork, communication, and decision-making, that will help them to thrive in postsecondary environments.

## How do Restorative Practices Mutually Support and Reinforce SEL Competencies?

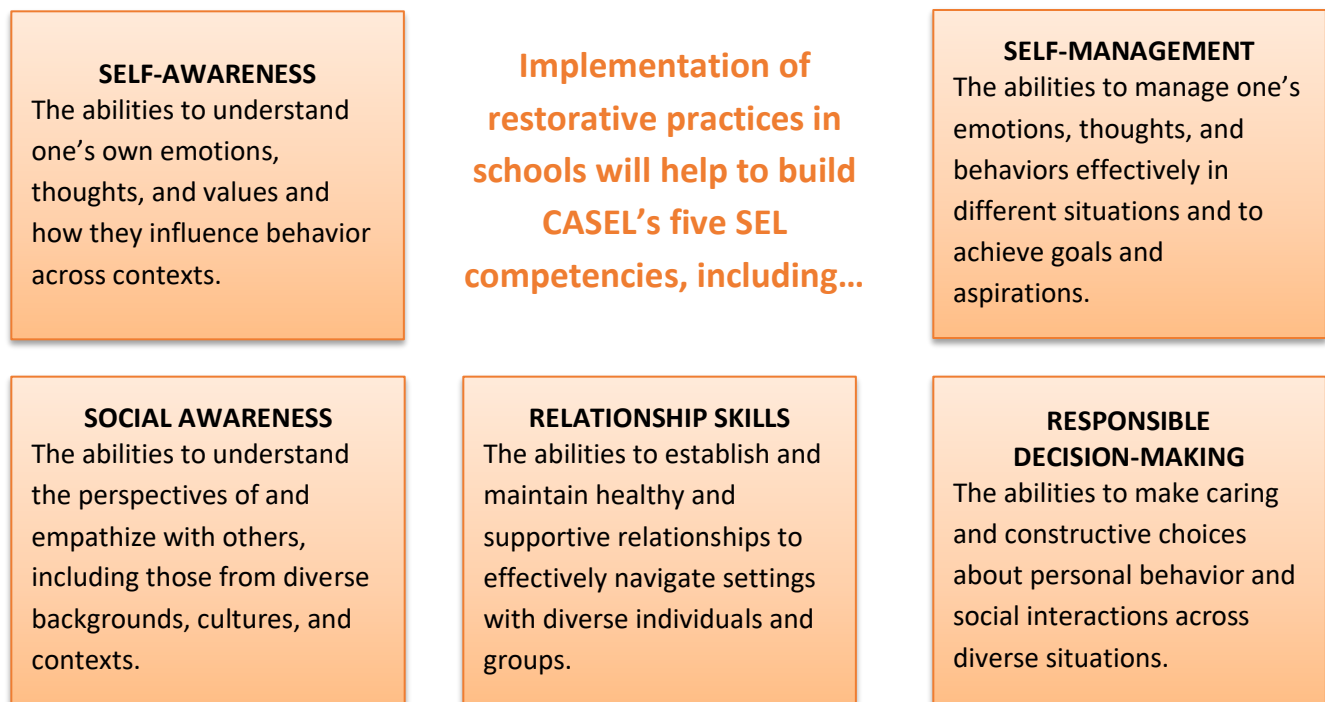
SEL is critical for both students and adults when working toward building community, resolving conflict, and repairing harm—all essential elements of restorative practice. With relationships and community at the heart of all RP, RP presents multiple opportunities to *develop*, *practice*, and *reinforce* the five social and emotional competencies (see [figure C](#)).

**Skill development.** When students are given opportunities to listen and talk through RP, they learn empathy, consider perspectives other than their own, practice impulse control, and reflect on how their actions affect the people around them. By using RP to build community, students learn to interact positively and understand each other’s perspective as they work together toward shared goals and address challenging situations.

**Practice and reinforcement.** By consistently and continuously using RP, both adults and students will have an opportunity to practice skills and build proficiency in SEL. Embedding restorative practice structures into real-world situations presents even greater opportunities for students and adults to practice and model skills for others. Those who have strong SEL skills—like managing emotions, showing empathy, and recognizing the perspective of others—will have more confidence and willingness to engage in RP, therefore increasing the likelihood of positive experiences and results.

**Figure C:**

### ***Alignment of Restorative Practices and the CASEL SEL Competencies for Adults and Students***



How restorative practices support the development of all five SEL competencies can best be illustrated by examining the following three major RP techniques: [affective language](#), [circles](#), and [responses to harm through conversations and conferences](#). For greatest impact on students’ SEL development, these techniques are most effective when aligned with schools’ evidence-based SEL programs and practices, implemented together, and used frequently and consistently by all members of the school community.

## Affective Language

Affective language consists of verbal and nonverbal communication that encourages individuals to be open and honest, nonjudgmental, empathetic, and present when communicating with others, whether in informal conversations, formal conferences, or in circles. Three key elements of affective language include:

### 1. “I” statements

“I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”

“I” statements are a structured way to recognize and communicate feelings, thus promoting *self-awareness*. Listening to someone else’s “I” statement helps us build *social awareness* by understanding how our actions affect another individual or the broader community. For example, “*When you talk over others during our circle, I feel frustrated because it goes against our class agreement about listening with respect, and I could see that others stopped sharing after they were interrupted.*” This statement names a feeling, describes the incident in an objective way, and helps us recognize the impact on others.

### 2. Empathetic listening

“What was that like?”

“Do I understand correctly that \_\_\_\_\_?”

**Empathetic listening** encourages us to listen to understand someone else’s perspective, thus building our *social awareness*. In order to listen empathetically, we practice *self-management* skills through the discipline of maintaining focus and refraining from speaking until the other person is finished. The listener can then respond with a question like “*What was that like for you?*” to better understand another perspective or demonstrate empathy through a mirroring statement like “*What I hear you saying is...*”

### 3. Affective questions

“Who do you think was affected by what happened?”

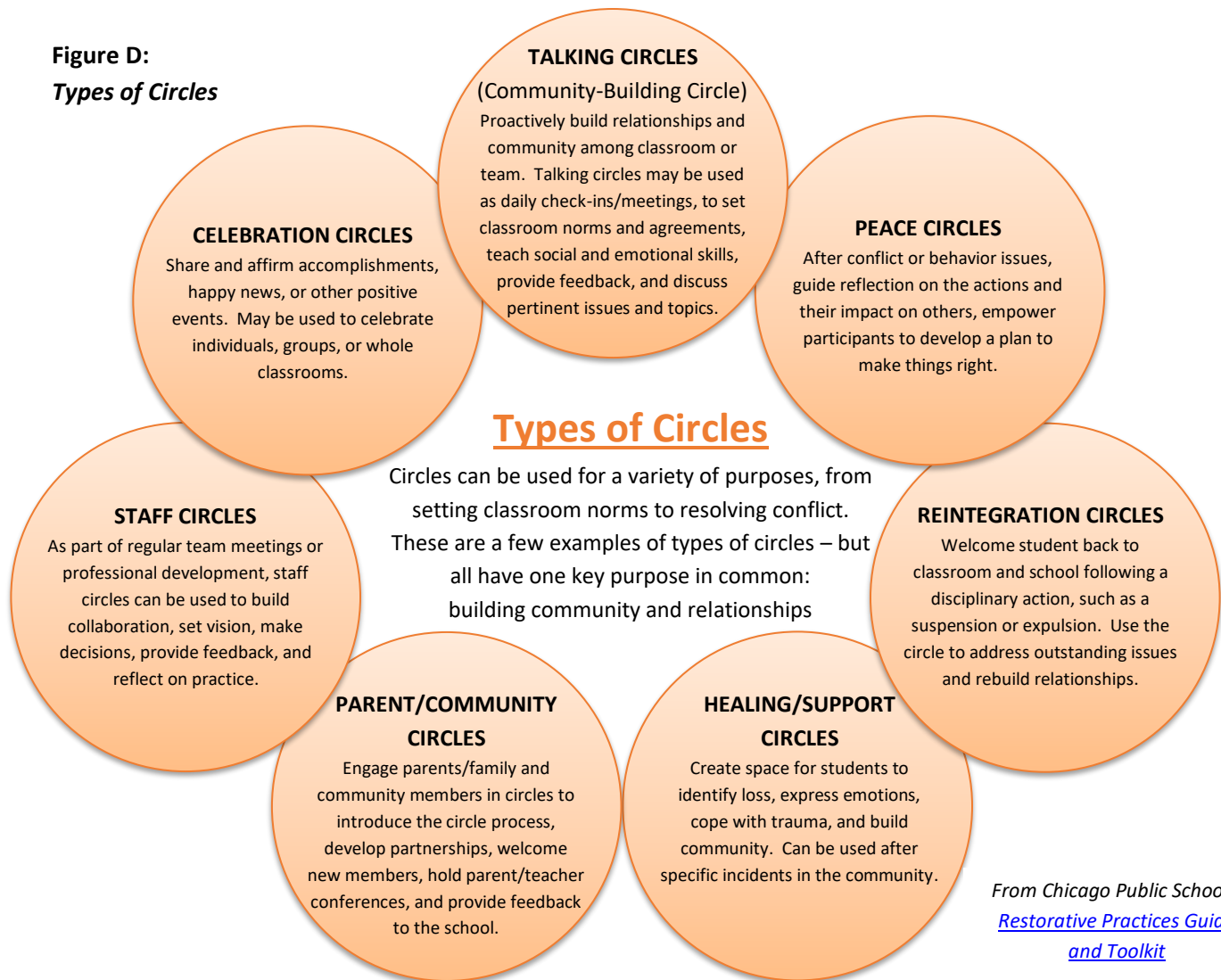
“How do you think they were affected?”

**Affective questions** help build *self-awareness* by placing responsibility on us to understand the impact of our behavior as well as *responsible decision-making* as we consider how to make amends. For minor misbehavior, strategic use of these questions asks us to consider how others have been affected by our behavior. For example, asking, “*Who do you think has been affected by this?*” followed by “*How do you think they’ve been affected?*” gives a person the chance to consider their own actions and change their behavior in the future.

**Circles**

A circle is a safe and confidential space, free of judgment or aggression, to share feelings, thoughts, and stories, and to connect to others. The structure of a circle removes hierarchy and helps all participants feel that they can be open and honest with the group. This safe space created by the circle also builds trust and respect, which are key to building relationships. Circles can be used for a variety of purposes, from setting classroom norms to resolving conflict, and in multiple contexts including staff meetings, classrooms, and out of school activities.

**Figure D:**  
**Types of Circles**



While the goal of **proactive circles** is to *develop* relationships and community, the primary goal of a **responsive circle** is to address wrongdoing through the *restoration* of relationships and community.

Rituals used within circles are effective in helping to develop SEL competencies of the participants. For example, a **centerpiece**, containing symbolic objects or words, serves as a focal point to support sharing and listening, while the **talking piece** is used to ensure that only one person talks while others listen, therefore reinforcing impulse control and listening skills.

**Proactive circles**, sometimes referred to as talking circles or community-building circles, provide an opportunity for students or adults to communicate, connect, build trust, and care for one another. These circles, especially when conducted as a consistent practice, give students an opportunity to develop and practice SEL skills such as listening, understanding strengths and differences, and sharing of emotions and experiences. Below are some examples of how to use proactive circles to promote SEL skills in the classroom.

- **Daily check-ins** build *self-awareness* by asking students to identify how they are feeling and/or introducing a lesson or activity to focus and set personal goals.
- **Establishing norms and agreements** requires students to practice communication and team-building, thus building group cohesion and *relationship skills*.
- **Instructional circles** prepare or engage students in a lesson and create a safe space for learning, developing student voice, critical thinking, and articulating one's ideas. By discussing a dilemma in fiction, a historical conflict, or a current event, students build *social awareness* and *responsible decision-making* as they analyze situations, appreciate different points of view, and solve problems.

Used to address moderately serious incidents or patterns of behavior affecting multiple people, **responsive circles** address wrongdoing by working with all participants to “make things right.” By guiding participants through rounds of questions, a responsive circle uses the rituals of circle practice and prepares participants to rebuild trust while reinforcing the use of social and emotional skills. Below are two types of responsive circles most commonly used in schools:

- **Peace Circles.** Always voluntary, these circles address moderately serious incidents or patterns of behavior affecting multiple people. Peace circles provide students with an opportunity to discuss the consequences of wrongdoing and decide how to repair harm using several discussion rounds allowing all participants to hear directly from the **harm do-er** (e.g. “*What happened? What were you thinking of at the time? Who do you think was affected by your actions?*”) as well as **those who were harmed or affected by the harm** (e.g. “*How do you feel about what happened? What has been hardest for you? What do you need in order for the harm to be repaired?*”).

Peace circles are highly effective in giving students a structure in which to address wrongdoing as well as to practice SEL skills. By giving all parties the opportunity to share their version of what took place while others ask questions and listen, a peace circle reinforces *self-management*, *self-awareness*, and *social awareness*. As the circle moves toward discussing how to fix the situation and rebuild trust, circle participants are called on to use and practice both *responsible decision-making* and *relationship skills*.

- **Reintegration Circles.** Used after a student has been removed from the classroom or school for more serious incidents, these circles help to integrate a student back into the community by addressing unresolved issues and rebuilding trust in order to eventually restore relationships and community. Examples of guiding questions used in these circles and asked of the student who was removed, a supportive group of peers, and a teacher or other supportive adult include:

- *What is new, has changed, or is different from when we were last all together?*
- *What are your hopes (or hopes for this student) for returning to school (class)?*
- *What would success look like for you (this student)?*
- *What do you need from us (I need from you) to achieve success?*

By holding a circle in which students can share their feelings, reintegration circles reinforce *self* and *social awareness*, as well as *self-management*. The process of setting goals for which they are held



accountable and rebuilding trust through these circles also presents opportunities to reinforce *self-management, relationship building* and *responsible decision-making*.

### Responses to Harm through Conversations and Conferences

Depending on the severity of an incident, harm can be addressed through informal impromptu conversations or formal and highly structured conferences between an individual who committed an offense and those harmed by the offense. By incorporating both affective language and a series of affective questions into these conversations and conferences, adults can guide students through stages of ownership, understanding impact, and reparation of harm or resolution of conflict.

- **Small impromptu conversations** are informal conversations used to quickly resolve conflicts or lower-level incidents involving two or more people. These conversations ask both the harm do-er and those harmed to reflect, answer open-ended questions, and take specific actions in order to resolve the conflict or repair harm. By using these conversations frequently and on a daily basis, students have ongoing opportunities to learn and practice essential SEL skills.
- **A restorative conference** is a highly structured formal conference employed by schools in response to truancy, serious incidents, or patterns of less serious incidents. Formal conferences are led by trained facilitators and use affective questions that are sequenced and scripted, giving both the person harmed and the harm-doer an opportunity to safely communicate directly with each other, express their feelings, ask and respond to questions, and have a say in the outcome.

As highlighted below, the following questions (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009) can be used in both impromptu conversations and restorative conferences and are an opportunity to practice the following SEL competencies:

Questions for Harm-Doers:

- **What happened?** Requires *self-management* skills to regulate one's emotions and tell the story objectively, using affective "I" statements.
- **What were you thinking of at the time? What have you thought about since?** Uses *self-awareness* skills to recognize emotions and thoughts, and how they may have influenced behavior.
- **Who has been affected and in what way?** Uses *social awareness* skills to take the perspective of and empathize with others.
- **What has been the hardest thing for you?** Uses *self-awareness* skills of self-perception and recognition of strengths and areas of weakness.
- **What do you think you need to do to make things right?** Requires *relationship building* to listen, communicate, and negotiate conflict constructively, as well as *responsible decision-making* to make respectful choices about repairing harm and rebuilding relationships.

Questions for Individuals Harmed:

- **"What did you think when you realized what happened?"** Uses *self-awareness* skills to recognize one's own thoughts and emotions.
- **"What impact has the incident had on you and others?"** Uses *self-awareness* skills to recognize one's own behavior and *social awareness* to take the perspective of and empathize with others.
- **"What has been the hardest thing for you?"** Uses *self-awareness* skills of self-perception and recognition

of strengths and areas of weakness.

- “What do you think needs to happen to make things right?” Requires *relationship building* to listen, communicate, and negotiate conflict constructively, as well as *responsible decision-making* to make respectful choices about repairing harm and rebuilding relationships.

## Strategies for Implementing a Whole-School Approach to both SEL and Restorative Practices

### a. Align RP and SEL under a single initiative

In many schools, educators face the challenge of implementing several in-school and out-of-school programs, initiatives, and practices at once, all with the promise of meeting student needs and working toward similar goals. Managing and implementing multiple initiatives can easily lead to “initiative fatigue.” Aligning related initiatives such as RP and SEL can minimize redundancy, conflict, costs, and effort and lead to more effective implementation. As a team, or in a meeting with both SEL and RP leaders, discuss questions below:

#### Planning and Leadership:

- What are our goals and desired outcomes for SEL and RP? Where do these overlap and align, and how do they support our school’s overall vision?
- Can one team support both SEL and RP so that they are ultimately seen as one initiative?
- If not, how do we ensure time for collaborative planning across teams?
- How do we align or combine efforts on professional learning and coaching, data collection, progress monitoring, and communication?

#### Implementation:

- Which practices can be integrated or modified to better achieve the vision, goals, and desired outcomes of both SEL and RP?
- Would changes to the school calendar, schedule, meeting times, or staff roles help facilitate efficiencies?

#### Coordinated data collection and continuous improvement:

- What data is already being collected to monitor implementation and outcomes of SEL and RP? How frequently?
- What kind of data will help us measure collective progress toward our shared goals?
- How can we modify the way we currently collect and analyze data to streamline our process and better inform decisions about implementation?

#### Structures for Communication.

- Can we coordinate the timing, messages, and methods used to communicate about SEL and RP?
- Should we “re-brand” by creating a new name and/or logo for the combined initiative?
- Who will communicate with staff about any changes in program priorities and explain any adjustments that need to be made in response to those changes?
- What method will we use to communicate an ongoing basis to achieve our outcome goals, and how often?



**b. Integrate preventive practices into all aspects of daily life in the school**

- [Foster a supportive climate](#) by creating schoolwide norms and shared values that all members of the school community agree to uphold.
- Create visual reminders of RP and SEL practice throughout the school building: in posters, bulletin boards, and written communication.
- Use a dedicated time within the school day, like an advisory period, to practice SEL skills and restorative techniques.
- Incorporate SEL and RP in all classrooms by leveraging existing (or creating new) structures and curriculum.
  - Use classroom community-building strategies such as [creating shared agreements](#) (i.e. a set of “promises” for the room) to provide students with an opportunity to use their social and emotional skills to collaboratively create a [supportive classroom environment](#).
  - Use [circles](#) or class meetings to foster a safe and supportive learning environment by giving students an opportunity to practice problem solving before a conflict occurs.
  - Infuse principles of SEL and RP (e.g., identity, empathy, community fair process) into academic content to [explicitly teach skills](#).
  - Allow students to design spaces in the classroom that create community and student ownership of that community. [Here](#) are some ideas for including students in classroom design.

**c. Establish restorative responses to behavior that promote SEL**

- Establish [discipline policies](#) that replace traditional punitive discipline with restorative structures and processes that embed and promote SEL.
- Develop [student-centered classroom discipline practices](#) that provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for students to learn, problem-solve, and take ownership of their behaviors
- Create a dedicated, neutral restorative practice space such as a [peace room](#) for conflict resolution.
- Develop clear and written staff protocols for responding to a range of behavioral incidents that include how:
  - Staff offer support to students for minor incidents by practicing restorative conversations in classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, etc. when the student is calm.
  - Staff communicate to the administration regarding major behavioral incidents that could disrupt the class or endanger the student(s).
  - Administrators communicate outcomes of RP interventions to staff for students who need to be reintegrated back to the classroom or school community.

**d. Strengthen staff skills and mindsets that mutually reinforce RP and SEL so they can model practices and support students**

- Provide opportunities for staff to:
  - Reflect on and unpack beliefs, mindsets, and attitudes around student behavior and discipline, and connect these to teaching practices and SEL goals.
  - Practice and model SEL skills such as listening and respecting others in order to support students in effectively navigating restorative processes.
  - Use real-world opportunities to practice restorative responses, thereby giving students ongoing opportunities to reflect, problem-solve, repair harm, and build positive relationships. For example, staff can:

- Encourage students to reflect on and articulate what they're feeling.
  - Support students through resolving a conflict by engaging in problem solving and reflecting later on the impact of steps taken.
  - Provide professional learning to staff on specific RP practices that promote SEL:
    - Use of affective language (“I statements,” empathetic listening, restorative questions).
    - Reflecting on the root causes of conflicts and taking into account students’ developmental stage and cultural or individual differences.
    - Asking restorative questions to address challenging behaviors and/or conflict.
    - De-escalating challenging behavior by managing their own emotional response and responding in a way that places the priority on strengthening the relationship and supporting skill development.
- e. Involve students, families, and community partners in SEL and RP initiatives**
- Engage all stakeholders in designing shared schoolwide expectations and climate practices.
  - Create a restorative justice elective, students advisory committee, leadership club, peer jury, or justice panel that promotes self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills.
  - Partner with a local organization with expertise in RP to offer leadership and community service opportunities for students that promote SEL, resources to address conflict or repair community, and staff professional development, consultation, and coaching.
  - Ensure that SEL and RP become part of the wider community by engaging all stakeholders in a discussion about these questions (from [Restorative Practices: Guide for Educators](#)).
    - *How does the school welcome members of the community?*
    - *How does the school ensure that it is a culturally respectful and responsive place, regardless of the setting, for students and adults (e.g. classroom, cafeteria, afterschool, and athletics)?*
    - *How are parents, caretakers, and community members engaged in school activities and connected to the school in meaningful ways?*
    - *What type of input can the community provide to address conflict inside and outside of school and in the community?*

## References

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- [Being heard: how a listening culture supports the implementation of schoolwide restorative practices](#) (Brown, 2017)
- [A Story Legitimizing the Voices of Latino/Hispanic Students and their Parents: Creating a Restorative Justice Response to Wrongdoing and Conflict in Schools](#) (Cavanagh, Vigil, & Garcia, 2014)
- [Teaching Restorative Practices with Classroom Circles](#) (Center for Restorative Process and San Francisco Unified School District)
- [Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit](#) (Chicago Public Schools)
- [Restorative Practices Handbook](#) (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009)
- [Want to Implement Both SEL and Restorative Practices? Read This](#) (Committee for Children blog)
- [The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: a meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions](#) (Durlak et al., 2011)
- [Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: An Updated Research Review](#) (Fronius et al., 2019)
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## Acknowledgement

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