

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN THE SOUDERTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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We in the Souderton Area School District (SASD), nestled in the Indian Valley, midway between Philadelphia and Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA, take pride in the strength of our community. It is this sense of connectedness that makes Souderton such a vital and special place. When people ask what makes the Indian Valley exceptional, our first response is, “We have a strong, supportive community.” While we know we have a good thing going, we also share a vision for brightening our future. The administration at SASD feels a compelling responsibility to build a lasting culture that esteems achievement and values community.

An integral part of this culture of connectedness is how we respond, not just to good news, but to difficult events as well. The educators at SASD share a responsibility to teach young people appropriate behaviors and skills for resolving conflict and living together in a community. The focus of the building administrators across all ten schools is to help students learn from their mistakes while holding them



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accountable for their actions. At Souderton Area High School and at other schools in the district, we are rethinking the traditional notions of school discipline as we foster this vision of school and community connectedness. Our goal is to help children understand that schools are places where they should feel safe and be able to learn, yet realize that this occurs only as they live in respectful, responsible relationship with one another in the larger school community.

In 2004 a small colloquium of SASD administrators and teachers piloted the restorative practices approach in the district's three secondary schools. The group was trained in the tenets and applications of restorative practices by the IIRP training staff prior to the start of the 2004–2005 school year. The administration then embedded restorative practices into its disciplinary practices and supported teachers' application of circles and restorative approaches to conflict and misbehavior. The effort was sustained through the 2005–2006 school year by training a new group of teachers. It will expand this year as the entire high school staff is trained and new junior high and middle school teachers join the colloquium.

We are delighted to report that restorative practices has had a profound impact on student behavior and school climate at the district's secondary schools. The high school is a case in point. Not only has the number of behavioral office referrals decreased, but teachers are also reporting a stronger sense of classroom community. School spirit is also on the rise. The school administrators have also employed restorative conferences for serious disciplinary matters. These conferences have helped mitigate conflicts between students, restore damage to reputation (and property), and even ensure a positive, incident-free graduation ceremony. Our commitment to this restorative approach manifests itself in the ways the administration and faculty manage student misbehavior and conflict. These approaches signal our clear intent to work *with* students, rather than do things *to* them.

During the 2003–2004 school year our district was fortunate to hire an elementary principal who had used restorative

practices in her previous role as a middle school principal. Since these practices have not yet been clearly defined for elementary age children, she began a journey with her faculty and students to articulate school rules and to use restorative practices in her discipline with students. Each year she asks teachers to create classroom rules and then send one representative from each class to several whole-school sessions where children discuss what's important for living together. The result is a set of school rules. Through her coaching, these rules typically evolve into statements around respect, responsibility and doing one's best. By giving children a voice, they begin to internalize and own the rules and become ambassadors back to their classrooms. Additionally, this principal provides specific, explicit examples of what these rules look like at school, helping children to differentiate between what may be acceptable at home and what is expected at school. Finally, the rules are sent home for both parents and students to read, sign and return, enlisting support from parents and further clarifying expected school behaviors.

The second area of focus for this principal was to introduce restorative practices into her discipline with children. To garner support, she sent her school counselor to a restorative practices training session and encouraged her to sit in on discipline conferences with children. As children arrive in the school office for serious offenses, they are asked to first write in a journal explaining what rule they broke. This provides time for them to cool down and defuse their anger while documenting the occurrence.

As the children are asked the restorative questions, they often struggle with offering suggestions to resolve the issue. The principal has found it effective to allow time for them to sit and stew, without intervening or offering suggestions. She's found that the process is very important, and that when children don't have to work hard to resolve conflict, they feel less remorse and responsibility. In instances where others are involved, children are asked to "circle up," inviting those who need to be there. The circle work is where the real justice issues

are addressed, as both the victim and the offender have support and a voice. This principal has also realized that children need explicit direction about how to make apologies to one another: looking and maintaining eye contact, asking the other person if he/she is ready for an apology and then saying, "I'm sorry for (the specific offense)." The receiver of the apology is also taught to respond with more than an obligatory "OK," by saying, "Thank you. I accept your apology." It's critical that young children are clearly taught how to interact restoratively, and repeated instruction is often necessary.

The children at this school have become accustomed to resolving conflicts and making things right as a result of these restorative practices. One particular child, who has been part of so many circles he could run them by himself, announced to another child who couldn't come up with ideas for making amends saying, "You know, this is good for at least three recesses and community service, if you want my advice!" Although disciplining restoratively requires extensive time on the part of the administrator as it's initially being instituted, the hours are worth the investment since the learning is so important for our children. Despite the need for discipline, children know they are being treated fairly and that the adults in the school community deeply care for them.

Recently an administrator at one of our schools dealt with an emerging toxic school culture that had left the community in shambles. Our superintendent made a commitment to support this school leader and solicited the services of an IIRP trainer, who came and worked with the school faculty for a day prior to the opening of the school year. By using circles and defining the authority of the principal as the school leader, the facilitator helped teachers articulate their concerns, listen to one another and ultimately commit to working together during the next school year. With three subsequent visits to the school, the IIRP trainer encouraged teachers to follow through with their commitments and to be truthful and honest in confronting one another. The year evolved into one of healing, greater openness among faculty, increased willingness to speak honestly

with one another, and ultimately a healthier environment for teachers, children and their families.

Recognizing that restorative practices are not only effective for students and teachers, our superintendent recently invited consultants from the IIRP to work with our district administrative staff to learn more about restorative supervision. School cultures, perhaps more than most work cultures, are extremely resistant to change, and administrators are frequently faced with the challenge of balancing pressure and support when working with teachers in the midst of constant change. We learned together, through circles and conversations, about fair practices that build trust and cooperation, about Tomkins' blueprint for healthy communities, about the role of shame in working with people and about becoming effective change agents in our schools. Additionally, we learned the need to provide those we supervise with clear expectations about their work, recognizing that most people do indeed want high support and high expectations in their work environments. As we acquired strategies for providing feedback to teachers and discovered the power of restorative problem solving, we left our two-day retreat feeling renewed and empowered to be restorative leaders in our schools.

At SASD, we're working hard to cultivate supportive, restorative school climates, rather than punitive ones. Training in restorative practices has enabled all of us—administrators, teachers and students—to view incidents of misbehavior and conflict as opportunities for learning, rather than merely as obligations to punish. By building positive relationships and community, we also increase the likelihood that students and staff will treat one another with respect and dignity. By helping students see how their actions affect others, including teachers and community members, we help them see those individuals as fellow human beings, rather than as authoritarian adults.

In SASD these efforts are further evidenced by our commitment to the Character Counts Coalition (for more information, visit www.charactercounts.org) and are supported by the excellent work being done by community groups, such as the

Indian Valley Boys and Girls Club. Additionally our elementary classrooms are utilizing the Responsive Classroom's Morning Meeting to build community and equip children with social skills for life together in the classroom. With this collective emphasis, we believe that our school system is evolving into a truly restorative community, and we are committed to achieving this transformation. Dr. Thomas Lickona, a leading voice for character education, has suggested that "education has always had two great goals: to make kids smart and to make kids good." The Souderton Area School District embraces these same goals for our children.