

# Restorative Schools

By Nancy Riestenberg

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Restorative philosophies are influencing the way that schools are operating, from the way they respond to harm to the way they discuss children's literature. In Minnesota, four school districts are demonstration sites for the use of restorative measures as an alternative to suspension and expulsion. The districts have adapted the processes of sentencing circles and victim/offender dialogue to address harm, from bullying and harassment to classroom disruptions and chronic attendance problems to "terroristic" threats. In addition, staff is applying classroom management techniques that teach the skills of self-control and tolerance.

**Students are reacting positively to the idea that we are looking at alternate ways to handle problem behaviors. There has not been one student who feels that detention serves a positive purpose.**

South St. Paul, a suburban school district, has three restorative justice planners, one in each of the two elementary schools and one in the junior-senior high building. They conduct circles to repair harm, promote understanding and teach problem-solving. For example, racist remarks by an elementary student offered an exceptional opportunity not only to repair harm but also to promote a deeper understanding of the effects of racism. The project coordinator wrote,

An elementary student made derogatory comments to three others about their race. Through the circle process the victims explained what the comment reminded them of: an uncle being shot by a white man who called him the same name as he was shooting him; a movie that has "those people dressed in white doing mean things to us." One student said, "It hurt my heart badly, and I need to do something about it." The offender/applicant explained that he then understood what he said was wrong. The students became friends, and they play together daily.

The district pairs the use of the circle to repair harm, with the discipline philosophy of Dr. William Glasser and Diane

Gossen. In her book *Restitution*, Gossen directs teachers to teach children self-control though an understanding of personal needs, the use of problem-solving skills and an expectation that children and adults can make amends—restitution—for the harm that they cause.

Princeton, a rural district in north-central Minnesota, has a restorative justice planner in the high school. He facilitates circles to address harm, support or healing circles, and discussion circles for classrooms that need help working out their class rules. He also provides education about circles at staff meetings, through e-mail and classroom demonstrations, with the goal of having teachers and deans use the process themselves.

The process gives all parties insight. The Princeton project coordinator reported last year that, in a circle, the staff learned of the debilitating effects expulsion had on one student.

A tenth-grade student was referred to circle for attendance issues. During the second circle, he told a story about how he had not felt comfortable in school since he had been expelled the fall of his eighth-grade school year for the entire year. No one at the high school had any idea how traumatic the experience had been for him until both he and his mother talked about it in the circle. He told the members that this was the first time he felt anyone at school had really tried to understand where he was coming from.

A plan was developed to help the student determine whether he would stay at the high school or enroll in the alternative learning center.

West Central Area Schools is a rural consolidated district made up of students from small towns in five different counties. They have embarked on a voluntary training program for staff with an educational consultant teaching teachers restorative and democratic classroom management techniques. At the same time, the consultant is also conducting restorative dialogues for harm between students and between students and staff.

The students are very encouraged by this change in approach. As the project director reported, "Students are reacting positively to the idea that we are looking at alternate ways to handle problem behaviors. There has not been one student

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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who feels that detention serves a positive purpose." Eventually, staff will also be trained in the intervention approaches of restorative dialogue and circles, so that the K-12 district can be restoratively self-sufficient.

The fourth school, Seward Montessori in the Minneapolis school district, trained the behavior specialist and assistant principal in the circle process. Circles are the first option for the administrators in this inner city K-8 school, suspension the last, and they have found that some problems are not solved in the first try. The behavior specialist used a multistage approach to resolve the competition of a group of girls that was affecting the class.

Three circles were held, first with the entire class, then with six girls and finally with three girls and their mothers. The social compact signed in the last circle by the girls and their parents included an agreement that if two girls were acting or conspiring to exclude another, the girls would stop and talk about it, stop and journal about it, talk to an adult, ask for a mediation or ask for a circle.

The school also provided training in circles for the staff, and more and more teachers are using the process in their classrooms. Circles, complete with a talking object, an introductory poem or metaphor, and a closing reading, may be used for morning meetings (where students and teachers check in and talk about how they are feeling), academic discussion groups or in class problem-solving sessions. Classes examine community and individual values through circle discussions of moral dilemmas using children's literature and stories.

These four projects are finding that the use of restorative processes as an intervention can be complimentary to some discipline philosophies. A strict behaviorist approach, where the teacher is trying to gain compliance through punishments and rewards, is less compatible to restorative measures than cognitive processes. In that approach, the teacher is a facilitator, helping the student to use thinking skills and to develop self-control. Teaching pro-social skills, such as giving and receiving compliments, identification and appropriate expression of feelings, problem solving, anger management and empathy are part of a cognitive-based classroom. Conflict resolution is taught and used by students and staff. Making amends is discussed, and of course practiced when harm happens.

## SCHOOLS

By Sam Halstead

- We want them to be responsible,  
so we show how they are responsible for the consequences of their choices.
- We want them to be positive and constructive,  
so we model, reinforce and reward positive and constructive activities.
- We want them to be non-violent,  
so we help them use practical, non-violent options to solve their problems.
- We want them to be kind and loving people,  
so we encourage their kindness and reinforce the love they already have for family and friends.
- We want them to quit being the tough guy,  
so we show how respect and tolerance are fundamental to society.
- We want them to quit hanging around losers,  
so we help them become winners.
- We want them to quit exploiting us,  
so we remain beyond exploitation.
- We want them to take control of their lives,  
so we show them how they can.

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One district described a teacher making amends in their grant report:

A teacher requested a circle with a student after he yelled at the student for not completing his homework. The teacher wanted to repair the harm done to the student out of anger and frustration. In the circle, the student's mother said, "Welcome to being human." The student said, "We all can do better, and I'm ready to do my part." The teacher had the courage to admit his mistake and seek help in repairing the harm through the circle.

Incorporating restorative measures into a school is for some educators a paradigm shift; but for others, it is another familiar tool. Cognitive behavior approaches have been developed, honed, written up into curricula and taught for many years. A teacher who involves the class in making the rules with her or who holds a class meeting every week, may already use conflict resolution and other problem-solving approaches to help students learn all that classroom life has to offer: the social-emotional as well as the academic lessons. Restorative measures are a welcome addition in such a holistic environment. ●