

Transforming School Culture: An Update

BY LAURA MIRSKY

The IIRP's SaferSanerSchools program has grown considerably since its initial pilot projects. The program is helping schools implement restorative practices, an approach that engages students to take responsibility for their behavior, thereby building school community and safety. For more information, please see: www.safersanerschools.org/library/ssspilots.html.

SaferSanerSchools is working with schools all over the world. An eForum article about its role with Community Prep High School, a New York City public school for students just out of juvenile detention, as reported in *The New York Times*, is at: www.safersanerschools.org/library/communityprep.html. An article about SaferSanerSchools, in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, is at: www.safersanerschools.org/library/phillyinquirer03.html.

Below are accounts of a few of the many schools using circles, "restorative questions" (What were you thinking about at the time? Who did you affect by your actions, and how? What do you need to do to make things right?) and other practices to build a restorative school culture. Administrators and teachers are developing lots of creative ways to implement the approach.

Holy Innocents Elementary School is one of five inner-city parochial elementary schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., implementing restorative practices with help from SaferSanerSchools.

The entire staff at Holy Innocents has been trained in restorative practices. Every teacher conducts at least one classroom circle a week, and most teachers feel that this has been very worthwhile, said the school's principal, Sister Shaun Thomas. Teachers are also using circles in faculty meetings. That has been "an incredible adventure," she said, "because a lot more has been said, and there's a lot more insights into people and where they're coming from than in the past."

Holy Innocents recently merged with three parish schools closed by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. The school's multicultural student population (African-American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Vietnamese) resides in several different neighborhoods. Restorative practices have definitely helped with that merger, said Sister Thomas.

Elizabeth McCollum, an eighth-grade teacher at the school, said that the approach has provided an open line of communication, allowing students to feel safe. With four schools from different parishes combining into one, gang activity increased, said McCollum. The restorative approach has helped students realize that there are other ways to resolve conflicts besides fighting. "Students told us about an incident with another student that they felt was unsafe for others," she said. "I don't think they would have felt safe telling us that before."

Circles build school community, said McCollum. She told a story about a boy in the school with cerebral palsy. In a circle held to discuss harassment and bullying, a student announced: "There's someone in the eighth grade who's being mistreated, who will not speak up for him or herself, and I won't tolerate it." Another student seconded that sentiment and apologized for mistreating others herself. "That was huge," said McCollum. "We experienced a great high of really incorporating this student into the community. They play football with him now out in the schoolyard."

Holy Innocents is utilizing restorative practices as part of a five-year Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools reaccreditation project. Asked how restorative practices fit with a Catholic school, Sister Thomas said she thought they fit with any educational institution: "In a school, teachers have a right to teach and children have a right to learn,

and restorative practices are a way to address behavior that works against that."

The semirural Souderton Area School District, in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, is implementing restorative practices in three secondary schools. Assistant high school principal Chris Hey said that they contacted SaferSanerSchools "to make a positive change." Although theirs is a stable community, he said, school spirit was low, and they were disciplining "the same kids over and over again."

An implementation team of teachers, guidance counselors and administrators from the three schools received restorative practices training. Now teachers and administrators are using circles and restorative discipline approaches. Staff gets together to share stories about what's working and what's not.

Restorative practices are helping to build relationships and community in the classroom. "We've had some students who are really disengaged, who'd rather sleep through class," said Hey. Now, because students are given an opportunity in circles to speak every day, and because they know each other better, they're more engaged in the learning process.



Eighth-grade students take part in a circle at Holy Innocents Elementary School, Philadelphia.

"I definitely see a change in those kids," said Hey. "They're not getting referred to us as much for behavior because they have a bigger stake in the classroom. Kids who last year had really combative relationships with us are now on our side and really trying to do better."

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Reaction from parents to the restorative philosophy has been very positive, said Hey, adding, "Parents really appreciate that we're giving their kids a voice in the process and that kids are making amends for what they've done."

Perry Engard, a business teacher at Souderton High School, finds circles and restorative questions very helpful. (He even uses the questions at home with his three-year-old.) Engard often opens class with a circle, incorporating lesson content. For a class on employment contracts, he asked: "What was the most unreasonable—or—reasonable treatment you've witnessed by an employer with an employee?" This introduced the legal concept of reasonable treatment by an employer, while exploring restorative philosophy.

Initially, Engard resisted using restorative practices for discipline. Then he caught two students cheating on a homework assignment and decided to hold a circle. Without naming names, he described the incident, and then asked, "If you caught people cheating, how would you think it should be handled?" A girl said, "I can't stand it when people want to copy my homework." Hearing her, the wrongdoers took responsibility for their actions. There has been no cheating in class since.

Souderton High Spanish teacher Tammy Caccavo does check-in and check-out circles at the beginning and end of class periods, which has helped build community in her classes. The kids love the circles, she said, discussing their hopes and goals and such topics as responsibility and respect. Because of the circles, she said, there has been little need to discipline her classes. Caccavo held a circle on parents' night to demonstrate the process, which was very well received.

At Souderton's Indian Crest Junior High School, restorative circles with students, teachers, guidance counselors and facilitators are now used regularly, said assistant principal Joyce Kemmerling. Consequently, students are not repeating negative behaviors, and their relationships with teachers are stronger. Kemmerling said that she likes the idea of working with students, "so that they own, not only their behavior, but the repair work and the amends that need to be done as

a result of their actions. I think that happens because they reflect on who it impacted."

Children love the restorative approach, she said, "but when they're asked a restorative question they say, 'That's a really hard question!' They're not used to being asked to reflect on their behavior. They're used to getting their consequences and leaving. And they come up with harder consequences for themselves than we would. That's important; it means that they see that their behavior is serious." Parents appreciate that their children are involved in the discipline process, said Kemmerling.

Indian Crest learning-support teacher Doug Henning (whose students have learning, emotional or behavioral issues), thinks that restorative practices can be as effective in learning support classes as they are in other classes. Since implementation began, he said, disciplinary referrals have decreased and student behavior has improved. Henning thinks it's important to introduce restorative practices such as circles as opportunities to share and get to know each other, rather than as punishment. He has regular check-in and check-out circles. Monday is "good and new day," when students share one good or new thing. Friday is "smiles and cries day," when they share something happy or sad. Henning thinks these circles enhance the classroom environment, and because kids enjoy the process, it can be used to address behavior and conflicts.

When Henning missed class one day, his students treated the substitute teacher very poorly. The next day, he held a circle with the class and the substitute. She told the students that their behavior had upset her; he shared his embarrassment and disappointment. The students, surprised, were contrite and eager to repair the harm. They followed through with personal apologies and letters. The next time Henning was out, the students treated the substitute teacher much better.

Stoddart-Fleisher Middle School, in inner-city Philadelphia, serves students from low-income, government-subsidized housing and the neighboring community, including area homeless shelters. Once cited as a "failing school," Stoddart-Fleisher is among the Philadelphia schools that are run by Edison



A circle of twelfth-graders at Souderton Area High School, Pennsylvania.

Schools, a private-sector school-management company. Stoddart-Fleisher subsequently achieved "Adequate Yearly Progress," as mandated by the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act, said principal Tom Davidson. But, he said, "Kids' behavior wasn't improving. The suspension rate was embarrassingly high." He asked SaferSanerSchools to train the staff in restorative practices, and they're in the beginning stages of implementation.

The staff found the SaferSanerSchools training "realistic, not theoretical," said Davidson, adding "[the trainers] didn't come in and say, 'What you're doing is wrong; what we suggest is right.' We were treated as professionals, not looked down upon, which is often the feeling staff has about outside consultants."

The staff is intrigued with what they've learned and are experimenting with the restorative principles, including the restorative questions. "When kids act up we have them write out the answers to the questions. They're engaged in thinking about their actions. Then they talk to the teacher and any victim that was involved," said Davidson.

Davidson sees the approach as a perfect fit for the school. "Everything we should be doing in a school is about teaching, whether it's imparting subject matter or about how human beings should relate to one another and how to resolve conflicts. Restorative practices give us a better framework to teach about those situations." He concluded, "Restorative practices are a phenomenon that's beginning to take hold in Philadelphia."

More information on restorative practices in schools will appear soon, including news about the U.S., the Netherlands, Hungary and Australia.Ⓜ