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IIRP to Support Philadelphia's Safe Schools and Single School Culture Initiatives

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) has been contracted by the Philadelphia Department of Education to provide training and consulting in restorative practices, to aid the city's Safe Schools and Single School Culture initiatives.

IIRP training will begin in Philadelphia's William L. Sayre and West Philadelphia high schools in spring 2008.

Dr. Amy Maisterra, Executive Director of Behavioral Health and Student Support, Office of Specialized Services, School District of Philadelphia, said that the restorative practices training is being supported by a Safe Schools grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

"The restorative practices model is one of several best practices models we recommended to a cohort of 40 schools to support positive school culture," said Maisterra. "Restorative practices fits in perfectly with these efforts."

Added Maisterra, "Our belief is that disruptive or aggressive behavior indicates that students feel disconnected from the school community. That's why incorporating the restorative practices philosophy is so critical in our efforts to improve school climate. It is a relational model that assumes membership in the community and holds students accountable in a way that reconnects them to that community."

Maisterra views the incorporation of the restorative practices model at several District schools as the beginning of a great partnership, because it was selected by the school communities themselves.

"Schools in this initiative received a menu of programs to choose from, so those that chose the restorative practices model are invested in it and see it as a good fit," she said. "We appreciate the state's support of this initiative, which emphasized local decision making. Many additional schools have expressed interest in the model, and we're hoping to be able to expand its scope in the fall."

Restorative practices, an approach that holds people accountable while actively engaging them in problem-solving, has been shown to be highly effective in resolving conflicts and building and restoring a sense of community in schools, social service, criminal justice and workplace settings worldwide.

West Philadelphia High School has begun "a mini restorative practices program" employing what they've learned from the IIRP even before starting the formal training process, said the school's assistant principal, Dr. Russell A. Gallagher.

"We've already found success. Restorative practices helps our students take care of issues themselves. They feel empowered, so they're less likely to repeat the offense that got them into trouble. It also lets us approach the situation from a calm, methodical perspective, with a structure in place. Structure helps kids feel comfortable and understand what they can do to prevent such occurrences from happening again."

The IIRP hosted a One-Day Conference, attended by 137 Philadelphia-area educators on April 24th at Loews Philadelphia Hotel, with keynote speeches by administrators who are successfully implementing restorative practices in their schools.

A graduate school and training and consulting organization based in Bethlehem, Pa., the IIRP has brought the restorative approach to educators, children- and youth-serving and criminal justice professionals in 50 U.S. states and as many countries.

The IIRP began over 30 years ago as Community Service Foundation (CSF), a school for struggling youth. CSF and its sister organization Buxmont Academy now operate eight schools, 16 foster group homes and in-home programs throughout eastern Pennsylvania, which have had great success employing restorative practices to help struggling youth turn their lives around.

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