

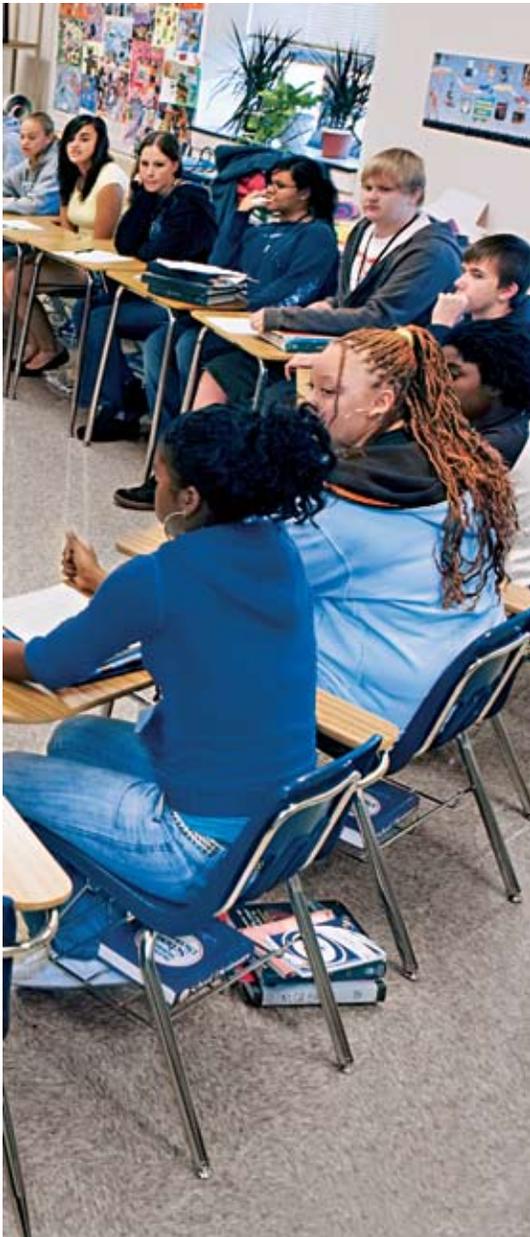
**Reading, writing, and social skills.**  
*Tenth graders in Helen Bowers's class at Pottstown High School in Pennsylvania convene once a week for a "restorative circle" to discuss class issues.*

**SCHOOL SAFETY**

# The Talk-It-Out Solution

**How can you promote safety?  
Try getting rid of the metal detectors.**

**BY CARALEE ADAMS**



### Trying restorative practices

One safer schools initiative making its way across the nation is the implementation of “restorative practices.” Rather than meting out punishments, restorative practices employs a talk-it-out approach to foster dialogue between aggrieved students. Students are taught basic social skills to problem-solve and lower the tension in schools. One premise of the strategy is that kids feel safe when there is cooperation instead of hostility; another is that kids who feel valued and connected at school are less likely to act out. Many administrators around the country are investing in restorative practices programs to build a healthy school climate in hopes of fending off violence and improving academic performance.

Restorative practices places responsibility on the students themselves rather than relying on zero tolerance and authoritarian control from above. It uses a collaborative response to wrongdoing, which is intended to be supportive, not demeaning. While some may feel it’s too “touchy-feely,” Wachtel maintains that it’s effective and its impact is proven.

In 1977, Wachtel and his wife, Susan, both public school teachers, founded the Community Service Foundation, a sister organization to the International Institute for Restorative Practices. Their work evolved into strategies they named restorative practices, a spin-off of the restorative justice movement. But it wasn’t until 1999 that the IIRP developed its SaferSanerSchools program that tailored the restorative practices concept to a school setting.

Newtown Middle School in Newtown, Pennsylvania, is one school that adopted the restorative practices model, and it has seen drastic changes in behavior. Over a three-year period, the detention rate dropped 82 percent and suspensions are down 59 percent. Administrators credit the approach with making the school safer by building a sense of community.

“When restorative practices were instituted, we started to have a cultural shift in the way we treated kids and adults. People began to treat each other with a lot of civility,” says Richard Hollahan, principal of the affluent suburban school of seventh and eighth graders.

### How it works

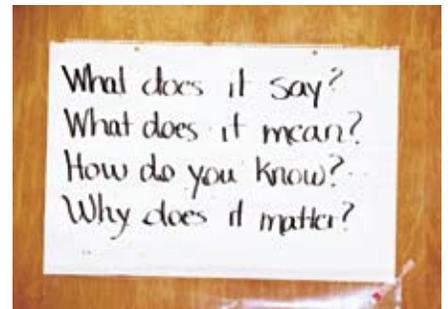
When a discipline problem arises, all the parties assemble in a circle. They present their sides and work to resolve the issue and restore their relationships. The emphasis is on repairing the harm, rather



**Kids in the hall.** A few classrooms used restorative practices; it is now schoolwide.



**Talking it out.** Bowers’s restorative circle can last from ten minutes to a half hour.



**Reading comprehension.** Safer schools means a sharper focus on academics.



**Honing social skills.** In a safe school, cooperation overcomes hostility.

**W**HAT MAKES FOR A SAFE school? Security guards patrolling the hallways? Metal detectors? Zero-tolerance policies? The answer may be none of the above: Educators are searching for new solutions to achieving harmony in the classroom and, surprisingly, they’re increasingly holistic. “There aren’t enough bars, metal detectors, or police to make a school safe if there is a culture of violence in a school,” says Ted Wachtel, founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. “You need to strike at the heart of the culture.”

PHOTOS: © RONNIE ANDREIN

## school safety

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than punishing the offender—although accountability is part of the process too.

At the core of restorative practices is the belief that people will make positive changes when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them. People accept decisions more readily if they have input, Wachtel explains.

While punishment may spur a temporary change, a more lasting solution is to help kids see how their actions impact others and how they can learn to control negative impulses, maintains Wachtel. “Kids don’t think of teachers as human beings. When they hear a person was frightened or hurt, they gain some empathy and they are more dramatically affected than by punishment,” he continues. “We have the mistaken notion that the only way to change behavior is to inflict pain and suffering, but that doesn’t work.”

### Get the support staff involved

When a school decides to try the restorative practices approach, IIRP suggests training all professional and support staff in a one-day introductory workshop, customizing it to the needs of the school. The goal is to build a culture where kids are less likely to do negative things because they have a relationship with teachers and staff, says Bob Costello, director of training and consulting for IIRP.

Training is recommended for everyone because support staffers often interact with students with very little supervision and not a lot of organizational power, says Costello. It’s important that they buy into the concept for it to become organic in the school, he adds.

The program encourages collective responsibility in which students help create and enforce the rules. The hope is that eventually they will say to one another, “We don’t act like that,” says Costello.

### Dramatic results

Restorative practices are being implemented mainly in public secondary schools, prompted by a mandate to improve school safety, says John Baille, training and consulting coordinator for IIRP.

Just a few months into using the program, West Philadelphia High School is seeing results. “We had a lot of issues of violence, fires, kids misbehaving in class, disrespect,” says Russell Gallagher, assistant principal at the low-income, racially diverse urban school. “We want the kids to take ownership. We think restorative practices will do that.”

Since West Philadelphia High adopted restorative practices last spring, suspen-

## Problems in Pottstown

**Below.** *Four years ago, principal Stephen Rodriguez made restorative practices schoolwide.*



sions are down 50 percent and recidivism has plummeted, says Gallagher. “You have to give students a voice,” he says. Often the victim in an incident is timid. But when they are given the chance to say, “That hurt me,” it empowers the student and includes accountability for the aggressor. “What restorative practices does is change the emotional atmosphere of the school,” says Gallagher. “You can stop guns, but you can’t stop them from bringing fists or a poor attitude. A metal detector won’t detect that.”