

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS IN SURREY, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Introduction to Surrey, British Columbia

The Surrey School District is the largest in British Columbia and one of the fastest growing districts in Canada. The student enrollment in Surrey for 2003-04 was approximately 63,000, spread throughout 123 schools, and includes a rich mosaic of cultures. One in every three Surrey students is from a household in which English is not the first language. Of the over 90 languages represented in Surrey schools, the highest percentages are Punjabi, Chinese, Hindi, Tagalog (Filipino), Spanish, Polish, Vietnamese, Korean and French. Five years ago, a group of four educators from Surrey were introduced to restorative justice (RJ) and group conferencing. After being trained as conference facilitators, they embarked on a mission to educate others about the potential for restorative justice practices in the school district. This paper will give an overview of their efforts over the past five years.

Princess Margaret Meets Restorative Justice

Jenni:

How did two already busy secondary educators get involved in restorative practices, without extra time, without it officially being part of our jobs, and in fact commit extra time to implement conferences and train others to also facilitate conferences?

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That question has crossed my mind. I had just switched schools, to head the counseling department at Princess Margaret (PM). I had come from a secondary school that only had grades 10–12 and relatively few discipline problems, or problems in general. What a change! PM was a happening place, as it is sometimes described. The first fall, the school hit the front page as one of the most improved schools in the province! This was now my school; did that mean it had been one of the worst?

It didn't take long to discover that it was busy. Conflicts were constant, bullying was common, and news of fights planned or happening were a given. It had the reputation of "a fight a day." It had been a predominately white school, changing quickly to a more diverse student population. The transition was proving difficult! It was considered an inner-city school, which means lower socioeconomic levels, low parent education and a very transient population. There were many special-needs students, with over 40 different languages spoken at home. In fact only about 25 percent of our students speak English at home. Within four years, the school had expanded from a student population of 1,000 students to the current level of 1,800 students. Parents were using any excuse to change schools.

To help change the school culture and combat racism, the administration had started Grade 8 Camps, but these mainly affected our new students who were most impressionable as the youngest within the school. Inner circle/outer circle techniques had also been used effectively. The YES program (Youth Educational Support) was in place with a non-educator to support students, hang out, do home visits and generally know what was happening outside the classrooms and after hours. "Teacher Talk" was a weekly lunch group of teachers that would discuss educational ideas and reflect on what changes could improve our classrooms and school. We had moved to restorative ideas, without the structure or process developed.

One suspension of over 30 students for smoking marijuana was an example of the challenges we faced. All the students were sent home,



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and parents and students were required to attend an evening meeting to sort out what next needed to happen. Margaret Mead's "It takes an entire village to raise a child" was the opening statement of that meeting. PM was already thinking of the community of students, parents and school working together to solve problems.

As a school, we preferred to work with students and their families rather than suspend them or kick them out. Our area counselor had heard of a training (the Real Justice conference facilitator training) that seemed to match our ideas, so we researched a bit more and signed up. We put together a team from the school to attend. Rick, Greg (a vice principal), myself and Dale from the YES program went. We returned to the school ready to take on the world, or at least our first conference. I think we all remember that one; it would have been a challenge for anyone, but especially for our first. We got excited by the process and especially by the results. Less than a year later, we did the Real Justice training for trainers, funded by the school board, with the promise that we would offer training to our district staff.

Rick:

School administrators come from a variety of backgrounds. In my case I had been a classroom teacher, career program facilitator and counselor. Prior to my first official vice principal appointment at PM, I had done a six months stint as an "acting" vice principal at another Surrey high school. Part of that assignment involved a conference scheduled with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) in which I represented the school. This was totally different than I expected, yet effectively resolved the problem to everyone's satisfaction. I was curious about conferencing as a result.

Regardless of "what hat I wore," there was one particular adage that I have attempted to follow when dealing with misbehavior or wrongdoing: "You've got to separate the deed from the doer, the kid from the behavior." I was determined to carry that philosophy forward into my new role as a vice principal at Princess Margaret. Traditionally, school administrators often start the new school year with some sort of "state of the union" address to the student body, in hopes of setting the tone for a positive year.

Being the new guy, I deferred to my fellow vice principal, Greg, to take the lead in the assembly. Rather than reel off a lengthy list of do's and don'ts, he summarized the school's expectations for student conduct using the acronym CCR, which stood for "courtesy, cooperation and respect." Greg also talked about "silly human mistakes" and the fact that we all make them. He encouraged the students to "do the right thing at the right time, for the right reasons."

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It will come as no surprise, given the mind-set that already existed for Greg and me, and the type of school culture that had been nurtured for several years prior to my arrival, that restorative justice and the philosophy behind it held great promise. In the fall of 1999, four of us from Princess Margaret—Greg and myself, Jenni (counselor) and Dale (YES program coordinator)—completed the two-day restorative conference facilitator training through the Real Justice organization. The majority of participants in the training were from the Washington State Department of Corrections. It was interesting to discover how much we had in common with the justice system participants, everything from concerns about the traditional and often punitive measures used to deal with wrongdoing, to our optimism surrounding the potential of restorative practices within our respective workplaces.

For the four of us, the training served to do two things. First, it reinforced that we were on the right path, in terms of what we were trying to instill in our students: courtesy, cooperation and respect. Secondly, it gave us a formalized approach to dealing with wrongdoing in school and community settings. We discovered that some important aspects of restorative justice practices were already in place at Princess Margaret. For example, it was common practice, though not always by choice, to have a number of family members attend disciplinary proceedings relating to a student. I remember my surprise the first time that not only parents, but also grandparents, showed up to one such meeting. I learned, though, what a valuable contribution can be made by having significant others in attendance.

We literally hit the ground running upon our return to the school after being trained to facilitate restorative justice conferences. As a matter of fact, we had spoken to our school principal during the two days of training. He had a situation waiting for us back at the school, one that seemed tailor-made for a conference. Since that initial training, we have never looked back, and in fact continue to use restorative practices, including conferences, in many of the daily aspects of our job.

School Implementation—How RJ Has Made a Difference

Jenni:

As a school counselor, I am not generally involved with direct discipline. Rather, my role is as a student advocate, encouraging growth and development of students' potential and learning. A large part of my job involves encouraging social responsibility, respect for others and the development of a safe and caring environment where all can learn. Part of that student learning process is taking responsibility for their own behavior choices and the consequences of their actions.

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Particularly within a multicultural student population, our challenge is often to help the parents and the family understand what is appropriate student behavior, and to have students take responsibility for their actions, regardless of their culture or background. Our parents are often quick to deny their child was even present during a conflict, a difficult position when the child's involvement has already been confirmed. Before a conference, "who is to blame" seems to be the main issue. Fairness and the perception of fairness are essential! Being given a chance to explain and be heard, as well as determine the consequences, gives everyone a chance to acknowledge how they have contributed to the situation. Students who have previously participated in this process will often request a conference as a way to resolve a conflict. Parents often thank us at the end of conferences, grateful for the opportunity to participate and be part of the resolution.

Anyone in a school setting will realize that it is often difficult to determine who is the victim or the offender; students often share both roles. Conflicts often date back to elementary school and are still unresolved! Restorative justice facilitates a respectful environment for the students, their families and supporters, while building community.

What I particularly like is the opportunity students have to learn from the process. They become aware of exactly how their actions have affected others. In addition, they gain awareness and insight about their behavior and realize that they always have choices. Some conferences are formal, but the majority of resolutions happen by asking the right questions of those involved. This can be a very concrete part of the social learning that takes place. We have students and their families for up to five years, from grades 8 to 12, which allows plenty of time to see the long-term results.

As a school counselor, almost everything is about relationships—how to develop, maintain, repair or restore relationships. It's also about community, creating a caring community that supports all those that are part of the school, as well as the larger community, even when mistakes are made.

Gordon Neufeld, a Vancouver-based clinical psychologist who has worked with aggression and violence among children and youth, talks about the importance of "attachment" and creating a "village of attachment." RJ is a way of creating and maintaining these attachments, which are critical to a child's development. According to him, "What makes the village a village are the connections among people. Relationship is the context for working with the child and is therefore the priority. Relationship must be facilitated first and foremost, before we deal with what does not work."

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It's surprising how many educators have come to the same place via different paths. Barbara Coloroso, well known for her books on parenting, expresses similar ideas: "When an entire community is committed to reconciliatory justice, young offenders are invited to rise above their misdeeds and violent acts. The goal is to mend and restore rather than isolate and punish. The search is not for vengeance but for ways to heal relationships." Again, relationships are crucial. She summarizes this, "What schools need is that shared sense of this is the way we do things here."

Because RJ puts relationships first, the potential to resolve conflicts is greatly enhanced. At PM we talk about being a family or a community working together, and we're all part of that caring community. As community members, we share the responsibility for the safety and security of all. RJ philosophy supports ways to maintain relationships and build community.

Rick:

It was not enough to have just four of us trained to facilitate restorative justice conferences. We wanted to introduce as many others as we could to restorative justice practices and the philosophy behind it. We did this in a variety of ways. On one of our professional development days we offered a half-day session to our staff. This session served as an introduction to restorative justice practices and was well received. We also attempted to use restorative justice conferencing as much as possible in the school. Whenever an incident involved or affected a staff member, we invited that staff member to participate, often inviting a colleague as a supporter.

Within a year of our initial training to become conference facilitators, we enrolled in the restorative conferencing facilitator training of trainers. As a result of this training, we went on to train approximately 125 people to facilitate restorative justice conferences. The majority of these trainees were educators from our own school district, but participants also included representatives from neighboring school districts, as well as from community agencies, such as the RCMP.

We have also done presentations over the past two years at the Provincial ESL (English as a Second Language) and EAR (Educators Against Racism) conferences. Restorative justice practices are particularly valuable in working with culturally diverse students in that they:

- a) Help build relationships with students. You may often be acting as an advocate on their behalf.
- b) Help students learn to match their behaviors to the setting.
- c) Assist in communicating expectations.

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We have presented to the entire staff of one of our district's learning centers. These centers enroll students, aged 15 and older, who have had some difficulties in the regular school setting. For many of these students, the difficulty has arisen as a result of what they perceive as rigid expectations and punitive disciplinary measures.

In June 2002, I was transferred from Princess Margaret Secondary, and for the past two years have been one of two vice principals at Clayton Heights Secondary. In terms of restorative practices, I was optimistic about the move. I knew that there were several staff members there who had completed the facilitator training, and that it was a school community in which all students were encouraged to be respectful and responsible citizens.

Several years ago, the Clayton Heights staff elected to hold two of the allotted professional development days in late August, just prior to the start of the new school year. This arrangement presented a wonderful opportunity for me, this past August, to introduce the entire staff to restorative justice practices, as part of a two-day focus on social responsibility and moral intelligence. My session received rave reviews from many of the staff, which simply reaffirmed my commitment to restorative justice practices.

Also, in each of the past two years, I have trained our peer mediators to facilitate conferences. The peer mediators are senior students who have been trained to assist their fellow students in resolving conflicts through positive means. These trained students are then available to either run conferences on their own or assist adult facilitators in co-facilitating conferences. So far, this initiative is in its infancy at Clayton Heights but is showing great potential.

There is a quote, sometimes attributed to Abraham Lincoln, that when slightly modified, exemplifies a critical dilemma in the life of a high school vice principal: "You can please all the people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot please all of the people all of the time."

There is no doubt that a key role of a school administrator is to provide leadership and direction to their school community. It is just as true that a huge portion of a vice principal's time is devoted to disciplinary issues. There are three key aspects of more traditional methods of dealing with wrongdoing, that when presented with the corresponding restorative approach, highlight the potential of restorative justice practices.

a) *The Outcome:*

The challenge, when facing a disciplinary matter or any other type of conflict, is to come up with a decision that will satisfy all parties

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involved. I call this “wearing King Solomon’s hat.” As per the earlier quote, this can be extremely difficult, even impossible, to attain. In a restorative justice conference, the agreement is arrived at and agreed to by the participants. Satisfaction with the outcome is far more likely, since everyone has had an opportunity for input. In fact, there have been times when I have thought, “If I were the victim, this is what I would want...,” only to be totally surprised when a sincere apology has completely negated the “pound of flesh” expectation.

b) Fear of Retribution:

As much as we speak to students about “doing the right thing,” we cannot necessarily expect them to follow through if “doing the right thing” means telling an adult about an incident involving another student. Students tell us that they would rather take the blame or suffer the consequences than “rat out” another student. This code of silence can be extremely frustrating. I believe that a part of this dilemma comes from the fact that more traditional methods of dealing with these incidents have been punitive in nature. For example, in a bullying situation, if a bully is dealt with through “punishment,” e.g., simply suspended, there is a greater likelihood that the bully will be angry at those that he/she feels are responsible for the punishment, often the victim and/or the adult who metes out the punishment.

First of all, restorative practice seeks to set aside blaming, and secondly, consequences are far less arbitrary and punitive if they have been arrived at through the conferencing process. Offenders are far more accepting of terms of a conference agreement when they have witnessed firsthand the impact of their actions and have been dealt with in such a respectful manner.

c) Perception of School Effectiveness:

When an incident lands on my desk, one of the first things that needs to be done is to get good information. This can involve hours of interviews with students. Often times, a parent whose child is involved will only hear a portion of the story and is not always privy to the rest of the information we have collected. Confidentiality may prevent us from sharing that information, so in effect, that parent only has a piece of the puzzle. It is often in these same types of situations that a disciplinary decision is made that has parents, staff, students or the community shaking their heads, saying, “Can you believe it? This kind of thing happens and the school did nothing.” Because conferences can and do include members of these stakeholder groups, you will rarely hear “...and the school did nothing.”

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What is the Next Step?

Jenni:

Rick and I have now trained 125 other staff to facilitate conferences; this includes both elementary and secondary counselors and teachers, district staff, child-care workers and RCMP school liaison officers, even whole school staffs. We have done presentations to staffs and community organizations.

We have yet to research how effective conferencing is within our schools. Rick hopes to work on this at his school with practicum hours. Anecdotal evidence indicates high satisfaction levels and less repeat conflicts. Students and parents appreciate the respectful, inclusive solutions that result, as well as the process of achieving them. Students request conferences if they have previously participated in conferencing.

We have yet to survey the staff we have trained to measure how much they use conferencing or restorative approaches. We have received numerous excited phone calls or emails after first “real live conferences” assuring us conferencing worked. But it is not clear if the enthusiasm has been sustained, as the time goes by after their training. Some school or community environments are more supportive of the philosophy necessary. The most effective school sites have several trained facilitators that can work as a team to facilitate conferencing as a discipline alternative or in addition to traditional discipline techniques.

All four of the original group that took the training, then the training of trainers, have implemented RJ in different ways. Dale, the YES coordinator at PM, has trained elementary school students to use restorative techniques on the playground to resolve conflicts. The school hired him as a result of an enthusiastic teacher who saw the benefits for her students and the whole school community. Greg, another vice principal at the time, has changed districts and has spread the word in Abbotsford. They have established a community nonprofit organization and trained several trainers and numerous facilitators. Now, as a principal of his own school, he’s taken the lead in using restorative practices for the whole school, setting precedent for the Abbotsford school district.

We are torn. How do we balance the needs of our respective jobs and how does this fit with our roles? This is totally unfunded and takes time! The realities are time constraints, budget cuts and demands outside our professional lives. What are the most effective approaches—training more facilitators, training students, continuing to change the culture within our respective schools?

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Rick:

Of the various emerging themes in education, two of them have received a great deal of attention in recent years, at least in our part of the world. These are:

- a) School safety and related issues, such as violence, bullying and harassment
- b) Character education aka social responsibility aka moral intelligence

For those of us using restorative practices in our schools, it is encouraging to see the close fit between those practices and the initiatives that fall within the two themes listed above. It makes sense to promote restorative practices based on that fit.

a) Within Maslow's hierarchy of needs, people cannot attend to higher needs until basic needs have been satisfied. Thus, a person's essential physiological needs must be met before he/she will consider such higher needs as security, belonging, esteem and ultimately self-actualization. Applying this analogy to a school, the need for safety and orderliness that accompany good discipline must be satisfied before the school can address such higher needs as a well-articulated curriculum, instructional effectiveness and ultimately sustained educational excellence.

Several years ago in the Surrey School District, the school board adopted a "zero tolerance" policy to deal with more serious incidents, e.g., weapons, drugs and violence. Unfortunately, to some people, zero tolerance equates to removal or expulsion from the classroom, the school or the community. An interesting perspective on this is found in the article "Zero Tolerance for Zero Tolerance" (Curwin & Mendler 1999).

Interestingly, one no longer hears the term zero tolerance bandied about as frequently as it has been in the past. The term, when it is used now, implies that we do not ignore the behavior and that there are consequences for those behaviors. An equal balance of consequences and empathy must replace punishment wherever possible. I recently saw a phrase used in describing old furniture that I had to write down because it fit so well when applied to youth in zero tolerance situations: "Restore, not replace."

Again, it all goes back to the "separate the deed from the doer" philosophy. We must ensure that we address the problem and not the person. When Winona Ryder was convicted of shoplifting in 2002, the deputy district attorney said, "I found Ms. Ryder to be a very nice individual. This was never about her character, only her conduct. We were simply asking Ms. Ryder to take responsibility for her conduct."

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This is precisely what we seek to do when we use conferencing to deal with serious incidents in the school, so much so that it is included in the facilitator's preamble: "We are not here to decide if _____ is a good or a bad person."

In the last couple of years, our district, like others in North America, has sought to understand what drives young people to commit exceedingly violent acts in school settings. Increasingly, research is showing that aggression and violence is related to a lack of connection. There are simply not as many positive "anchors" in the lives of young people—be it church, neighborhood, family, etc. We have all heard the saying "It takes an entire village to raise a child." One of the positive aspects of restorative practices is the fact that the likelihood of healthy connections with adults in a school or community setting is far greater.

b) There are many of us in education who believe strongly that we must move from instructing academics and controlling behavior to instructing academics and behavior. Theodore Roosevelt said, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." Throughout history, education has had two major goals: to help people become learned and to help them become good citizens. Lately there has been a renewed focus on character education and social responsibility. One needs only to check ministry of education, school district, and school goals to see social responsibility listed alongside the more traditional academic goals of numeracy and literacy.

Here in British Columbia, we have performance standards for social responsibility that include four categories:

- Contributing to the classroom and school community
- Solving problems in a peaceful way
- Valuing diversity and defending human rights
- Exercising democratic rights and responsibilities

Michelle Borba (2001) suggests ways to develop good character in our children. She defines character, what she calls "moral intelligence," in terms of seven core virtues: empathy, conscience, self-control, respect, kindness, tolerance and fairness.

That these seven essential virtues are also underlying tenets of restorative justice philosophy further reinforces our belief that restorative practice is on its way to becoming truly mainstream in North American education.

Aspects of restorative practices that we hope to develop further include:

- a wider introduction to students, staff and community, and
- the gathering of data to support what we already believe to be true—that restorative justice works.

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In regard to “spreading the good word” about restorative justice, we will be presenting at the Canadian Student Leadership Conference in September 2005. In May 2004, we presented to our district’s youth care workers. This group of employees works directly with at-risk youth in our schools and often assists in resolving incidents of wrongdoing. Wherever and whenever possible, we will be presenting to community/parent groups as we have in the past. Ideally, we would hope to include representatives from these groups in our future conference facilitator training.

The Clayton Heights staff member who oversees the peer mediation program, and initiated the restorative justice conference facilitator training of those students, is working on a Master’s degree and is prepared to devote a 200-hour practicum to restorative justice initiatives. We plan to use a portion of the practicum hours in the development and application of satisfaction surveys and data gathering. Having data relating to disciplinary referrals and suspensions will help us measure the effect of restorative justice initiatives in our schools. This is the type of hard evidence that will be valuable when we seek funding from our district and/or community partners.

To truly make a difference in helping young people develop social responsibility, which in turn impacts issues like safety and violence in schools, we need to look beyond “stopping” behavior and focus on “changing” behavior. It all comes down to building relationships in a caring environment where the dignity of all parties is preserved.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our experiences and thoughts with you. Reflecting on our experiences has renewed our commitment and enthusiasm for the magic and power of restorative practices.

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Appendix: Two Conference Stories

A Violent Assault

In each and every conference that we have facilitated or otherwise participated in, something positive has resulted. Every now and then, a conference comes along that could serve as a “textbook example” of the incredible potential of conferencing. Here is an example.

One Friday afternoon in May 2003, four boys were in a vehicle traveling the wrong way down a one-way lane at a Surrey high school. Shawn, a grade 8 boy, was standing outside with his friends and noticed them. Shawn began laughing at the fact that they were going the wrong way. Shawn lost sight of the car and thought no more about the incident. Shortly afterwards, one of the boys from the car came up behind Shawn and hit him on the back. Startled, Shawn asked the boy what grade he was in. “Grade 12,” was the older boy’s response.

“Hi, I’m Shawn and I’m in Grade 8,” Shawn stammered, hoping that the difference in their ages would dissuade the older boy from taking things any further.

Unfortunately, this was not the case, as a second male from the car joined the older boy. The two boys pinned Shawn up against a car in the staff parking lot and began pummeling him. They used such force in throwing Shawn up against the car that it was damaged as a result. Although there were several people watching the altercation, no one intervened. The two boys dragged Shawn in front of an oncoming truck, which had to come to a halt to avoid hitting Shawn. The two boys ran back to their car and took off. None of the onlookers was able to identify the older boys or to give any detailed description of the boys or their vehicle. What witnesses did say was that it looked to be some sort of gang initiation. Because the four boys in the vehicle were Korean and Shawn was Indo-Canadian, it was even suggested that it might have been racially motivated. At this point, it was unclear whether the older boys were students at the school or outsiders.

A school administrator contacted Shawn’s mother, Zeena, who happens to be a supervisory aide at another Surrey high school. Zeena rushed over to Shawn’s school in a panic, unsure of what awaited her. Zeena was met by school administrators and an RCMP constable. Fearing that it could be gang related, Zeena was instructed to take Shawn home and “lie low for the weekend.” She was also warned to watch for unfamiliar vehicles cruising through their neighborhood, and even to be on the alert for gunshots.

After what Zeena called “a weekend of hiding,” Shawn returned to school on Monday morning. The school administration believed that they knew who the two older boys were. However, as it turned out, they had

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the wrong two boys. On Tuesday, the two boys from the assault who had taunted Shawn confronted him in the hallway. The two boys were subsequently suspended. In the days and weeks to follow, requests from Zeena for updates on the situation seemed to fall on deaf ears. The school and the police, trying not to make her worry, told her that the matter was being dealt with. In Zeena's words, she felt completely left out of the loop. "Nothing happened," she said, "until 29 days later when we were invited to a meeting at Shawn's school." In attendance at the conference were the two older boys (one had both parents, the other had his mother there), two pastors from the boys' church, a Korean translator, the RCMP officer who had handled the file, the RCMP school liaison office, the teacher whose car was damaged during the incident, Shawn, Zeena, Shawn's father, Shawn's older sister (an older brother, aged 22, was too angry to attend—"He wanted to take matters into his own hands," Zeena explained), and the school vice principal. The district counselor facilitated the conference. Prior to the conference, Shawn and his family met with the school and district staff and the police. Shawn's parents felt that the other parents didn't know what their sons had done. Zeena recalls feeling put off by the police officer that handled the file, who remarked, "I do shift work, what do you want—blood?" She felt better when the vice principal apologized for not getting back to her sooner. Zeena learned in the pre-conference session that the older boys had initially blamed Shawn for the incident.

They claimed that Shawn had been taunting them and started punching them first. A school district official said to Zeena, "Your son played a part in this, and he has to accept responsibility." It felt like some people were looking to blame Shawn for what happened. Zeena was apprehensive about the conference and the chances of successfully resolving the conflict.

Soon after the conference began, Zeena realized that the parents of the two Korean boys were just as worried about their sons as she and her husband were about Shawn. She also discovered that they had "this thing about coming to this country to want betterment for our children." The Korean families explained that, in their culture, Shawn had broken a big rule by speaking disrespectfully to his elders. Zeena said, "We became just two families with the common ground of love of their children." The Korean parents expressed remorse for the actions of their sons. Zeena described how it felt as a mother when she got the phone call from Shawn's school the day of the incident. She said that it felt as though she had aged during "the longest drive of my life." As she spoke, tears formed in the eyes of the two older boys. Zeena spoke of cowering in their home. Two of Shawn's teeth had been loosened and there were several lumps on his head. He was extremely unhappy during

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the monthlong period between the incident and conference. Zeena's daughter was a recent graduate of the same high school that Shawn and the boys attended. She had won numerous awards in high school and wanted Shawn to have similar fond memories of high school. She told the group what it was like to watch her parents cry every night. Perhaps the older boys gained a different perspective hearing it from someone close to their age. Certainly when they heard that word of Shawn's assault had spread rapidly throughout his relatives, they began to get a sense of the number of people their actions had affected. It was more than just a little fight between them and Shawn.

At one point in the conference, Shawn and his family members had indicated that he would not be safe as long as either of the two boys were in the same high school. It seemed to have reached a stalemate. The parents of the older boys were worried that they would have to move and find new accommodations if their sons were not permitted to return to that school. To the conference facilitator, it seemed to be a hopeless situation. However, Shawn, after listening to the boys, their parents and their pastors, said, "It's OK, I want them to stay at the school." The older boys started smiling. In speaking to Zeena after the conference, she said that it had been an incredible release to see a month of unhappiness change before her eyes.

During the agreement phase of the conference, the families of the older boys offered to pay for Shawn's dental work and for any counseling services required. While the agreement was being typed up, everyone stood up and chatted. As soon as people stood up, they began hugging each other. Most people had cried during the conference. At one point, Shawn's father somehow got on the topic of food. This led to a discussion about different ethnic foods. Shortly after the conference, Shawn's family received a phone call from the family of one of the older boys inviting them over for a traditional Korean meal. Shawn and his family agreed that it was an extremely noble and kind gesture, and they accepted the invitation. Gifts were exchanged between the three families. Shawn brought his steel pan, a musical instrument, with him. He played it for everyone there. The older boys each took a turn playing it as well.

A year later, Zeena looks back on the conference as a wonderful opportunity for the boys to take something and teach their friends—in her words, "take it outwards." Ironically, Zeena ended up working as a supervisory aide at the same school the three boys attend. The older boys are like protective big brothers to Shawn, watching out for him at school. One of the older boys is struggling with English; Shawn is tutoring him. Zeena is able to carry on friendly conversations with the boys whenever she sees them at school. In her words, the conference helped people "leave the garbage behind, pick the important thing, and work toward that."

5TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CONFERENCING & CIRCLES

Graffiti

Rick:

Prior to my first official vice principal appointment at Princess Margaret, I had done a six-month stint as an acting vice principal at another Surrey High School. The person I was replacing had been seconded to a district position and prior to his departure, had left me a “to do” list. Along with the more mundane and familiar tasks, like ordering textbooks and planning for second-semester activities, was one that went on to change my life and the way I interact with others. As I recall, it read “RCMP meeting” or something to that effect.

My predecessor explained that a constable from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had scheduled a meeting for an upcoming evening at the school. This meeting was being held to address an incident involving three teenage females. None of the girls currently attended our high school, but they had spray painted some particularly vile graffiti on the outside walls of the school and the portable classroom housing our Alternate program. The Alternate program enrolled students whose social, emotional and/or behavioral problems prevented them from functioning successfully in the regular program.

The graffiti was directed at the Alternate students and two teachers at the school, one of who was in her final year of teaching after over 30 years at that particular school. The Alternate program students were furious and “wanted blood.” The teacher, on the eve of a well-deserved retirement, was devastated. I was told that my role at the meeting was to represent the school and those who had been targeted through the graffiti. I was asked to purchase some refreshments for the meeting and to get the room ready. “No problem,” I thought. “I’ve been to many meetings before, including ones of a disciplinary nature.” Boy, was I in for an awakening!

As I sat down to prepare an impact statement, I quickly realized that my words and thoughts, in isolation, might not truly capture the manner in which those targeted had been affected. However, it was not as simple as just inviting those parties to attend. First of all, because the three girls who had been caught were young offenders, there were some confidentiality issues. Second, based on the feelings voiced by the students in the Alternate program, there were some very real concerns about the safety of the three offenders. Members of the Alternate class were invited to write letters to the three, telling them how they felt about the graffiti. I did invite the two teachers to attend. The male teacher who had been named in the graffiti thanked me but declined, while the female teacher became very emotional and indicated that she thought it might be too upsetting for her. I spent a lengthy period of time talking

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with her about her feelings. In the end, I felt that I could do a reasonable job of conveying those feelings to the three girls.

The day of the conference rolled around. I set up the room as I typically would, with a rectangular arrangement of tables and chairs. I placed the refreshments in a back corner of the room. The RCMP constable arrived early, before the other participants, and promptly began to undo all of my carefully arranged room setting. Tables were moved out, chairs were arranged in a circle, and even the tray of juice and cookies was moved to a different corner of the room. His request for a box of tissues really aroused my curiosity.

Shortly before the scheduled start time of the conference, the three girls arrived. Two of them came with both parents; the third girl brought her mother. Of the two girls who brought both parents, one also had a younger sister in attendance. It is significant to note that the younger sister had Down's syndrome, since comments written on the portable classroom included phrases such as "retards go home." Although the younger sister did not participate fully in the conference, the impact of having her there, given the comments written, was powerful. There was also a representative from a Youth Intervention Program (YIP).

During the conference, when it was my turn to speak, I read several letters to the girls, written by the Alternate program students. Partway through the first letter, the tears started to flow. I outlined the emotional strain the girls' actions had had on the school and also shared our concerns about the costs incurred to clean up the graffiti. As it turned out, one of the fathers present was a school custodian in a neighboring school district and was only too aware of the potential cost.

In the agreement phase of the conference, it was agreed that several things would occur:

- a) The girls would write letters of apology to the staff and students they wrote about.
- b) The girls would "give back to the school" by doing some volunteer hours.
- c) The families agreed to cover the cost of removing the graffiti, with the girls then agreeing to work out a schedule to repay their parents.
- d) The girls all agreed to participate in counseling sessions arranged through the YIP.

As an aside, the story of this particular conference was included in an RCMP publication, "Community Justice Forum: Canadian Resource Guide."