

FORUM

Restorative Practices at Community Prep High School in New York City

BY LAURA MIRSKY

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), via its SaferSanerSchools program, is providing training and consulting at Community Prep High School, a public school in New York City for young people just out of juvenile detention. These are the kind of kids who are typically stigmatized as “tough” or “incorrigible” and written off. The story of how the IIRP and Community Prep’s staff collaborated to implement restorative practices at this remarkable school was reported in *The New York Times*.

“Each year, as many as 8,000 New York City students, ages 13 to 18, return to their neighborhoods from juvenile detention centers and placement facilities ... after serving time for offenses ranging from assault to drug possession. ... An overwhelming majority are black or Hispanic, and poor. They have low reading scores, records of truancy and disruptive behavior and few credits toward graduation. About half have been labeled as needing special education. Many have no parents at home,” wrote Sara Rimer, in her article, “Last Chance High,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2004. “But just at this crucial moment, many high schools, reluctant to take on what they perceive as difficult students, turn them away.”

Community Prep was launched in the fall of 2002 to help such students. The school is a partnership of CASES (the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services, www.cases.org), a nonprofit agency that operates programs in New York City, and the City Board of Education.

The school’s first year, wrote Rimer, was rocky. “Teachers, who offered more support than structure, were overwhelmed.” Said CASES director Ana Bermúdez, “Before we began our work with the IIRP, outrageous behavior and sporadic attendance were the norm at Community Prep. It did not feel like a safe place to be, much less a place for young people to turn their lives around.”

Bermúdez’s first experience with the IIRP was at a Real Justice (an IIRP program) restorative practices training in the late 1990s, in Rochester, New York, with IIRP director of training Bob Costello. Bermúdez was impressed with the philosophy and methods she learned about in that presentation, and saw the potential implications for her own work, said Costello. Eventually, she asked the IIRP to work with CASES.

Before Community Prep embarked on its second year, Bermúdez called on the IIRP to train the staff. Wrote Rimer, “The school reopened in Manhattan last fall with a new staff trained in an approach that had been successful at eight privately run schools for delinquent youth in Pennsylvania. It emphasized structure and high expectations as well as counseling and support.” The “approach” mentioned in *The New York Times* is restorative practices; the “eight privately run schools” are operated by the Community Service Foundation (www.csfbuxmont.org), the IIRP’s sister organization.

Rimer’s article depicts restorative practices in action, in the following account of a restorative justice conference held after a student threatened a teacher: “Administrators sat down with [the student], his mother and [the teacher]. While they made it clear to [the student] that his behavior was unacceptable, they also told him that he was bright, and that they wanted him in school. Ms. Bermúdez went through a series of questions with [the student]: What were you thinking [at the time]? Who did you affect by your actions, and how? What do you need to do to make things right?” After a few months of being in an environment where such interactions are commonplace, this student’s behavior had improved enough for him to return to his neighborhood high school. There are many such success stories at Community Prep.

Mark Ryan, Community Prep principal, is thrilled with the way restorative practices

have helped the school, saying, “Students who had exhibited difficult, negative behavior before the implementation of restorative practices thrived in an environment of firm limits combined with abundant support. ... Restorative practices helped Community Prep High School become a safe community, a place where students can make real, meaningful changes in their lives.”

Community Prep, said Costello, is “an unbelievably bold undertaking—to put so many of the worst behaved kids in one building and give them an opportunity to make changes.” The first year, he said, they had struggles, but these were “part and parcel of any start-up.” The school staff “had beliefs that matched restorative practices, but they needed practical, hands-on stuff. We gave them a framework, a common language and strategies that matched their philosophy.”

Costello stressed that Community Prep’s staff has had to figure out how to use what the IIRP has taught them. “They’ve done all the hard work, setting up their own schedules and organization,” he said. He added that the staff has been “remarkably open to feedback” and has actively sought out the IIRP’s guidance. “It takes guts to ask for help,” he added.

Costello brought up “another critical issue. The question everyone always asks is: Will this work with New York City kids? Will this work with tough kids?” His answer: “These students are no different than students anywhere else. Their behavior is identical to kids’ behavior anywhere. The differences are in intensity and frequency. Children are children.”

The relationship between the IIRP and CASES is ongoing. Restorative practices have been so effective with the “tough New York City kids” at Community Prep that CASES plans to implement the approach in several other programs. ☉

See letter from Ana Bermúdez and Mark Ryan on reverse.

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Dear Colleagues:

We are the co-leaders of Community Prep High School, in New York City, which was the subject of a July 25, 2004 New York Times article, “Last Chance High,” by Sara Rimer.

At Community Prep, we work with some of New York’s most challenging teenagers—teens returning from juvenile detention centers, teens with extensive records of truancy and disruptive behavior. The success we’ve had with our students was in large part made possible by the restorative practices training and consulting that we received from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). I cannot overstate the value of the approach to working with youth that we learned from their wonderful trainers and consultants.


The year it opened, before we began our work with the IIRP, outrageous behavior and sporadic attendance were the norm at Community Prep. It did not feel like a safe place to be, much less a place for young people to turn their lives around. The school staff was overwhelmed; the school’s founders knew the school needed a new approach in addition to new staff.

We started working with the IIRP to develop our school culture and learn how to make sure our school held students accountable. Our work with the IIRP taught us the importance of balance: use high doses of structure and support simultaneously, balance reactive and proactive actions, and make sure that as you hold students accountable you reaffirm their value as human beings whose lives are worthwhile.

Since we began using restorative practices at Community Prep, we have seen great improvement in our students and have begun to realize our dream of creating and sustaining a meaningful learning environment. Students who had exhibited difficult, negative behavior before the implementation of restorative practices have begun to thrive in an environment of firm limits combined with abundant support. Many who had previously showed little concern for school, the staff or their classmates became willing to support fellow students who were struggling, to confront each other’s behavior, and to take responsibility for their education. Some of these students became leaders and mentors for newer students. Restorative practices helped Community Prep High School become a safe community, a place where students can make real, meaningful changes in their lives.



Mark J. Ryan, Principal



Ana M. Bermúdez, Director