

Notes from:

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SPECIAL EDUCATION, RESTORATIVE CLASSROOM: WHAT HAS WORKED - Thomas S. Simek, Jessica K. Petrolati. Presented Oct. 21, 2013 at the 16th World Conference of The International Institute for Restorative Practices, Bethlehem, Pa.

HISTORY OF BUXMONT SCHOOLS-SECONDARY LEVEL

Buxmont Academy has been operating secondary alternative education programs for well over 35 years. In addition, over the last 13 years special education students have also been served. Buxmont Academy's programs serve as demonstration schools for IIRP's Graduate School and the effective use of restorative practices in an educational setting.

START OF ELEMENTARY PROGRAM-HOW AND WHY

The elementary alternative education program is now in its third year. It was started at the request of one of our school districts to address the needs of its elementary special education population who had been traveling a considerable distance to attend private school special education placements. As might be anticipated these youngsters were experiencing considerable difficulty traveling back and forth to their schools. Enrollment at the end of last school year was 17 at risk and special education youngsters from a number of local school districts.

STAFF MAKE UP

Staff is comprised of a coordinator, a counselor and a teacher. What is unusual is that all three of these individuals are both regular education and special education certified. In addition a physical education, art, and music teacher instruct a class once a week.

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES WORKS WITH ANY AGE GROUP-MAY HAVE TO MODIFY TERMS. IEP's MODIFIED TO GRADE, ABILITY AND AGE LEVEL

The restorative practices words that we have all become familiar with may need to be modified based on youngsters age and ability. Following the PA Department of Education requirements for IEP development Buxmont was well versed at the secondary level. IEP goals and objectives now had to be developed for this elementary population. We continue to explore and develop elementary goals and objectives to address the needs of the youngsters we are serving.

BEING EXPLICIT-SPECIFIC

It is important that we are explicit in our directions and expectations for our youngsters. Any ambiguity opens the door to possible confusion, frustration and potential acting out behavior.

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Praise, praise, praise is a keyword in our program. Even though these students are young they come to us with the package often given to them by family, friends, peers, teachers, neighbors, etc that they are bad and dumb. Often these youngsters have very low self-esteem or that it may be easier to act out then to try to tackle a difficult math problem or to try a settle a dispute with a classmate. It is our job to instill confidence and give students the tools to resolve conflict and repair any harm created. With these skills it is our objective to return the youngsters to their districts public school classrooms.

ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

All actions have consequences. Completing an assignment or avoiding confrontation brings recognition and praise. These successes are passed on to the Buxmont Academy youngsters parents and school district representatives. Acting out behavior and academic difficulties are also shared. Youngsters are given the opportunity to apologize to the individual(s) who has been harmed, restitution is made and a plan developed to address a similar situation should it occur at a later date. The youngster has the opportunity to confer with any staff or fellow students, to develop a plan to move forward.

STAFF EXPECTATIONS

All staff has to be on board and familiar with restorative practices.

Buxmont Academy provides ongoing in-services for its new and veteran staff. To avoid sending mixed messages to the students staff need to be familiar with restorative practices philosophy and terminology.

Staff needs to project a united front

The youngsters that we serve recognize our vulnerabilities and often will try to play one staff member off another or keep asking each staff member for a response to a request until they receive the answer that they desire. On going communication among staff lessens these possibilities and lets the students know that we are constantly updating each other.

Team approach to problem solving

It is very important that the team communicates effectively. The members meet at the end of each day to discuss the progress of each youngster.

Willing to accept feedback both positive and constructive to better improve relationships and services to students.

Staff members need to feel free to provide feedback to each other. Discussions include how a situation could have been addressed more restoratively and how potential future situations will be handled.

Establish nonverbal communications among staff

Staff need to learn to communicate with each other in ways that are not obvious or disruptive to students. This ability provides assistance to youngsters and prevents negative occurrences from arising or escalating.

Role model appropriate behavior and be able to express your emotions.

We expect our students to follow the classroom norms and to feel free to express their emotions. We need to have the same expectations of our staff.

Academic flexibility-in presenting subjects, methods and materials

Youngsters can easily pick up that we enjoy particular subjects or activities. This enthusiasm can be contagious. Utilize this in staff members. Math lessons can be disguised in science activities or games. The youngsters have the opportunity to interact with young farm animals and then visit them in their farm setting. A number of small animals have also found a home in the classroom.

Currently in the Buxmont Academy “Zoo” we have a hamster named ButterScotch and two parakeets, Blueberry and Pineapple. Students have a daily “Zoo Keeper” responsibility to feed the animals and make sure they have enough water and clean living space. The animals have been a great addition to the Buxmont family. Students show a lot of compassion for the animals and it has minimized the amount of loud outburst from students. When it is too noisy the birds will begin to squawk, this is like a reset button for upset students, often getting them to calm themselves more quickly due to not wanting to upset the birds.

STUDENTS EXPECTATIONS:

Understand Cardinal Rules

Cardinal rules have been developed for all of our schools. The rules have been modified for this younger group of students. They are:

1. No acts or threats of violence to people or property.
2. No leaving school property without permission

3. No stealing

As a group students develop classroom and trip rules/norms

Norms are established for the classroom, the bus and for any trips. Cardinal classroom rules are presented and youngsters develop the other norms to fit the occasion. What is interesting is that these rules developed by the youngsters are the same ones that would have been presented by the adults. What is significant is that they were developed by and agreed to by the youngsters. Through Fair Process students take ownership. Youngsters on occasion may have to be reminded that this is something that they developed and agreed to.

Participate in group

We have the expectation that all students will participate in group. This includes ongoing check-in and checkouts and when necessary to discuss a situation, the harm has been done and what needs to be done to rectify the situation and develop a plan should a similar situation arise.

Free to express concerns appropriately and ask for assistance

Students need to feel free to appropriately express their emotions. When something positive has been achieved staff needs to recognize this and share this excitement with the class. When a youngster is frustrated by an assignment or by the actions of another student they need to feel free to bring this to the attention of staff and possibly the entire community

Work up to ability level

We have the expectation that students will work up there their ability levels. Students need to recognize that staff is present to assist them.