

## PEASE Academy: The Restorative Recovery School

BY NANCY RIESTENBERG

*Nancy Riestenberg is a prevention specialist with the Minnesota (USA) Department of Education's Safe and Healthy Learners Unit. She presents workshops on bullying prevention, restorative practices in schools and school climate.*

In a recovery school, the students commit to working on recovery from chemical dependency and addiction while becoming successful students. Since all of the students attending the school have been in chemical dependency treatment, the safety of the environment is the first concern of students, their families and staff. Applying restorative principles and the process of the circle has helped one recovery school create a truly respectful, student-centered program.

PEASE Academy ("Peers Enjoying A Sober Education"), located in a church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was the first recovery high school in the United States, founded in February 1989. During the last several years, through staff training and application, the school has incorporated the circle process and restorative principles into its program. Circles are used on Mondays and Fridays for youth to check in about the highs and lows in their sobriety. All 65 students and about five staff participate in the circles.

Circles are also used during the week as part of in-depth learning and community building. Sometimes students take turns being the circle facilitator or "keeper" and pose questions for the rest of the groups of about 12. The language arts teachers use the circle in their writing classes, and some other teachers pass the talking piece to find out what students know, for instance, about the War of 1812. Using the

talking piece ensures that each student will have the opportunity to participate.

But it is the circle for the student who has recently struggled with chemical use that has transformed the school the most. At PEASE, if a student uses and immediately asks for help with it, the student is able to remain at the school. They must be willing to learn from the experience and improve their recovery program. Students who are secretive about use must leave the school. When this occurs, often the student will return to treatment and recovery. They will come back to the school after that.

In the past, confidentiality rules prohibited the staff from saying why "John" is no longer attending the academy. "That created a lot of angst and anger with the students," explained language arts teacher Angela Wilcox. Rumors would fly, and students would accuse staff of not being fair to classmates who were expelled.

Now if a student uses and is open about it, a condition of the plan to stay in school is to hold a circle with the entire student body. Everyone participates as the student talks about what has happened. If a student must leave the school due to relapse, they have an option: they can leave without a circle or they can leave after having a circle. That way, if a student is suddenly gone one day, students can ask, "Where is Maddy?" and the answer is "Maddy is gone and she chose not to have a circle." Everyone knows what that means but no confidentiality is broken. Students can call Maddy on their own time. The angst and rumors don't roil up.

These "prolapse" and relapse circles are a vital component of the school,

Wilcox believes. For a youth who has to leave, it is an opportunity to tell their story, apologize and hear from the other students. Often youth will say, "I know what you are going through because I have been there. I hope you can come back in a good way. This is what I have learned from you—thank you." Students are able to share their concerns for their classmate and then let go, "which is what we try to teach them for their sobriety every day—to let go." Students return to class able to work, since they have had a chance to discuss some very challenging and painful issues.

"If the chemical dependency counselor comes to the fifth-hour class and says, 'We need to have a circle,' we will all go," says Wilcox. "Every teacher knows that in the long term, the circle saves time and energy. It is worth it to take the time."

If a student completes further treatment and their recovery is stabilized, they can return to PEASE and re-enter with another circle, where they can share what they learned and their plan for sobriety.



**Students participate in a circle, an essential community-building process at PEASE Academy.**

# FORUM

The other students can easily welcome them, because even though they broke the rule and left the school, the relationships were not broken.

Circle is not group therapy, says Wilcox and others who use the process with youth who are or have been in treatment. It is a communication process where everyone is respected, listened to and can participate. Participants sit in a circle, and a keeper or facilitator (either staff or student) opens the circle, welcomes everyone and passes a talking piece. The person who has the talking piece gets to speak, hold it in silence or pass it on. Everyone else gets to listen. "There is a tremendous amount of permission given to a youth to talk when they have a tangible, physical object in their hands," says Cordelia Anderson, one of the trainers for the Academy staff. "Quiet students," said Wilcox, "even students new to the school that morning will speak when they get the talking piece."

Wilcox describes the process as one that honors every voice and gives time to every student. Everyone is heard, everyone listens. It is because of the respect and safety of the process that so many students who are being expelled ask for a circle and perhaps why expelled students often return. The process is hard, though, especially for the relapsing youth.

Although the process can have strong therapeutic value, Anderson—a therapist herself—sees that there are significant differences between circle and group therapy. In a circle, the hierarchy is flat and the process is not led by a therapist. With the passing of the talking piece in an orderly manner around the circle, there are no back and forth confrontational dialogs. In therapy, some voices can dominate (although a skilled therapist can mitigate that), while in a circle all have a turn to be heard, and there is more listening and reflecting.

Kay Pranis, formerly with the Minnesota Department of Corrections Re-

storative Justice Unit, posed the question about circle and therapy group to both adults and youth as part of circle training at the Red Wing Correctional Facility (which has separate units for male juvenile and adult offenders), in Red Wing, Minnesota. While the adults all thought circle was just like group, the youth very clearly noted distinctions. They spoke of the power of the therapist over the youth in group. Said Pranis, "When someone has power over you—to get to another level in the facility, to get extra privileges, to ultimately get released—your behavior is to that power. The young men talked about offering phony behavior in group because they were trying to get to the next level."

Pranis continued, "The people facilitating therapy groups have good intentions and are working within professional protocols and frameworks. But sometimes they don't recognize that the kid is speaking to the power and not to the truth. Or they recognize the youth is not speaking the truth but don't know how to get around that problem." In circle the youth felt they could speak truthfully because all were treated equally, people could pass without some serious consequence, and confrontation was replaced by deeper listening. It was a safe place.

The PEASE chemical dependency counselor does conduct group therapy in a separate sobriety group, and she sees the two processes as complementary but different. The counselor arranges the prolapse and relapse circles, in that she calls everyone together. Once assembled, however, she says to the group, "Kurt wants to hold a circle" and hands the talking piece to the student. The student opens the circle, explains why they are all there and passes the piece to the group, staff and students for their comments, observations, insights, disappointments and encouragement. The student also closes the circle.

In these circles there can be "70 people in the circle—everyone is patient," says Wilcox. "It feels like the circle belongs to everyone who is in it. No one person is in control, and there are no predictable outcomes. Insight and tone can come from the most surprising people."

In the past they held group meetings where students confronted each other on suspected use, but from Wilcox's observations, they seemed much less healthy, more like a witch hunt. With the culture of circles, the students are accustomed to being heard and honored, and the edge is off, replaced by concern.

The Academy's initial three-day training in circles and restorative principles included all of the teachers, the administrative assistant and the staff person for the church facility they use, a community liaison from the neighborhood the school sits in and the special education teacher assigned to the school from the Minneapolis School District, 14 people in all.

The small size of the school allowed for an easier application of the ideas and process, as did the 100 percent buy-in by staff. "There was not a second's hesitation on the part of the staff," said Wilcox. "This program at the school is a natural fit for circle work. Students come to us from treatment. They are used to sitting in groups and sharing feelings."

The circle process is also used to repair other harms, like a fight, angry words or a problematic classroom situation, and to address conflicts between students. The staff has even called a circle for themselves to meet with the board of directors and to start the new school year by addressing issues left over from the previous year's work. "We would be hypocrites if we didn't try it ourselves," noted Wilcox.

For more information, go to <http://www.peaseacademy.org>, or contact Nancy Riestenberg, Minnesota Department of Education, at 651-582-8433 or email [nancy.riestenberg@state.mn.us](mailto:nancy.riestenberg@state.mn.us). ☉