

"Instead of doing things to students or for them, we do it with them."

Bob Costello

director of training at International Institute for Restorative Practices, in Bethlehem, Pa.

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APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Seventh grader Frank Paglianite, 12, apologizes to teaching assistant Kaaren Lyle for throwing food in the lunchroom at Palisades Middle School, which uses "restorative practices." A Bucks County man was the idea's primary developer.

Discipline idea is making grade in local schools

By Susan Snyder

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

During lunch the other day at Palisades Middle School in Bucks County, three students caught throwing food were sent to the office.

In many schools, they may have received a detention or a verbal lashing.

Instead, they were handed journals and told to reflect on whom they had wronged and what they would do to make sure that such behavior doesn't happen again.

Practices such as this one have resulted in a sea change in behavior in this sprawling, rural school district, home to Lake Nockamixon. Palisades High School has cut out-of-school suspensions in half in the last four years. Disciplinary referrals at both the high school and middle school have plummeted.

Under "restorative practices," educators approach poor student behavior

with more than traditional punishment. Students must meet with those they've wronged, explore what happened, and make necessary amends. The process can happen in groups as small as three and as large as a whole class. Parents can be involved, and sometimes writing is used as a first step in getting students to think about their actions.

Bucks County resident Ted Wachtel, coauthor of the ToughLove books for dealing with troubled teens that became famous in the early 1980s, was a primary developer of the disciplinary system. He is president of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, a nonprofit based in Bethlehem.

The idea is rooted in a worldwide movement that began in the criminal-justice system and that seeks to engender empathy and a sense of debt among criminals for their victims.

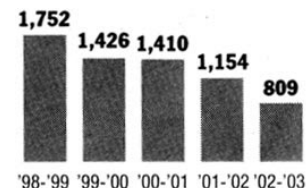
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Changing Behavior

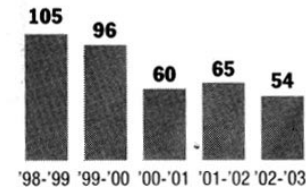
Recent years have seen a drop in disciplinary infractions in the Palisades School District.

Palisades High School

Disciplinary referrals to student office:

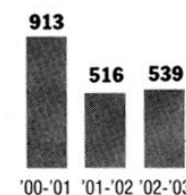


Out-of-school suspensions:



Palisades Middle School

Disciplinary referrals to student office:



SOURCES: Palisades School District; International Institute for Restorative Practices

Discipline practice at local schools is making the grade

PALISADES from B1

"I really see a better result," said Fran Ostrosky, a Palisades Middle School social studies teacher and president of the teachers' union. "I don't think you have as many repetitions of the same kind of actions, and a rapport is built between the students and the teachers."

The approach has begun to spread to other area districts. Springfield Township High School in Montgomery County is in its third year of the system.

Lower Merion High School in Montgomery County is beginning to use it. And E. Merton Crouthamel Elementary in the Souderton School District in Montgomery County is using some of the practices and is considering an expansion.

All three schools share a characteristic: They are led by former Palisades administrators who saw the program's success.

The Philadelphia School District, which has had a longstanding struggle with student violence and disruption, also is considering trying restorative practices in 50 elementary schools if grant funds can be secured, said district spokesman Fernando Gallard. The research project is led by the Jerry Lee Center of Criminology at the University of Pennsylvania. "We want to look at restor-

ative responses to low-level problems, such as shoving students in line," said Lawrence Sherman, director of the center. Wachtel's institute could be involved in training school staff for the project, but it would have to compete in a bidding process, Sherman said. The proposed project, which also would involve a control group of 50 schools, would last about four years and cost about \$2 million. The Penn center is seeking funding.

In September 2002, Philadelphia started a tougher "zero-tolerance" discipline policy under which principals, at the risk of being fired, must report all violent incidents and hold students accountable.

While the institute's methods have shown success in the suburban schools, they have yet to be tested in an inner-city public school in which assaults, weapons and other serious violations are often more prevalent.

"The truth is, that's the next thing for us to show," said Wachtel, an educator and an addictions counselor who was born in New York City and grew up in Allentown.

Wachtel explained that the institute's approach is simply a method for changing the culture in a school in a "deliberate, creative way." It also can be used to improve academics,

Letter to the Editor, November 26, 2003

Dear Editor:

Thank you for your excellent article, "Discipline idea is making grade in local schools," by Susan Snyder on November 17, which describes the results of our organization's efforts to bring restorative practices to schools in the Philadelphia region.

I was concerned, however, with one quote that characterized Palisades High School as making a transition from "an embarrassment to a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence." As a parent of three Palisades high school graduates, I think that it would be more accurate to describe Palisades High School's change as that of "a good school that got even better." Thanks again.

Sincerely,
Ted Wachtel
President, IIRP



Principal Richard Heffernan of Palisades High School, which follows the "restorative practices" system. It has seen out-of-school suspensions cut in half and disciplinary referrals plummet in four years.

APRIL SAUL / Inquirer Staff Photographer

it. He listened to the secretary, who reached into the filing cabinet, handed him a journal, and told him to write. He accepted responsibility for hitting a teacher's aide with a piece of popcorn and later apologized to the aide.

"It was an accident. I really didn't mean to," he told the aide.

Later, a group of teachers and administrators met in a circle with a student who had skipped four classes earlier in the week.

Science teacher Joe Serrill told the 13-year-old that he hurt his class partner by not being there to do his part. The boy said he had skipped class because he wasn't feeling well.

"Do you see where you can't take things in your own hands?" Serrill asked. "We're responsible for you."

Ostrosky, the student's social studies teacher, said: "I'd like to see you trust us enough to say that there's a problem. I'd like to see you earn back our trust."

Until then, the teen must sign in and out of class.

Joseph Roy, a former Palisades principal who is now the principal of Springfield High, said his school also has seen a drop in disciplinary infractions.

Last year, the school used the practice to deal with athletes who had etched their names in lockers. The maintenance workers who had to repair the lockers, administrators, and the students met in a circle. Students were barred from participating on their team for a while and had to pay for the damage.

"The underlying notion that I like is that it's all about relationships," Roy said. "When they don't just get a punishment, but they have to figure out how do they restore it or fix it."

Abrahams said he enjoys the process: "It gets people out of their box, out of their comfort zone, out of their circle. It helps you expand as a person."

At the high school, Rich Kressly, a teacher trained to deal with conflicts, met with two students who had been in a fight a few days earlier. Both students explained that the conflict was rooted in ongoing harassment by other students. Kressly planned to hold another session with the other students.

Another restorative practice, called "check-in, check-out," is used to begin and end some

classes. It allows teachers and students to explore problems and ideas. Earlier this month, for example, a multimedia communications class started with a question from the teacher: Who would you most like to eat lunch with and what one thing would you ask?

"I want to meet God and ask him why we're here," senior Jesse Abrahams said. Abrahams said he enjoys the process: "It gets people out of their box, out of their comfort zone, out of their circle. It helps you expand as a person."

At the middle school, seventh grader Frank Paglianite and two others were sent to the student office that same day for the food-throwing incident. "I shouldn't be here," one student complained. "I tossed a cheese ball, like two centuries. God!"

But Paglianite, 12, didn't fight

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