

Teachers learn new approach to problem kids

ALTERNATIVE PHILOSOPHY AT WORK IN AREA SCHOOLS. Proponents believe in working with the victimizer.

BY KURT BRESSWEIN
The Express-Times

BETHLEHEM | Behind the freshly painted facade at Bethlehem's Main and Walnut streets, a new graduate school explores the philosophy that discipline falls short in reforming youth and adults.

Classes began last month at the nonprofit International Institute for Restorative Practices. Founder Ted Wachtel celebrated the opening Thursday, midway through a conference attended by some 300 people from around the world.

Restorative practices are tactics used alongside discipline in public schools, alternative schools and the criminal justice system. The idea is to reach out to offenders to help them understand the impact their actions have on others.

The ninth annual World Conference on Restorative Practices held Wednesday through Friday in Historic Hotel Bethlehem marked the conference's return to the United States after three years overseas, organizers said.

Mandy Miller of Bethlehem spoke highly of restorative practices' impact at Bucks County's Palisades High School where she teaches English. The school has used the philosophy for resolving student problems since 1998.

Miller said she has seen an increase in school pride and self-esteem among students through talking to them and connecting them with mentors rather than simply meting out punishment.

"A lot of the times, the tendency of the teacher is to be like, 'Sit down, be quiet, do your work. Why? Because I said so and I'm



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Ted Wachtel, founder of the International Institute for Restorative Practices, celebrates the opening Thursday of the organization's new Bethlehem building.

the teacher. The end," Miller said. "And actually having conversations with the students, having them be a part of the whole process, we all learn. It just becomes a better environment for everybody.

"In the past there have been

times when I would look at an attendance sheet and a certain student would be absent, I would be like, 'Yes, all right!' And now it's not that way. We work together."

Joseph Roy, principal at Springfield Township High School, also in Bucks County, re-

counted one restorative-practices session called for a handful of eighth-graders accused of picking on a fellow student. The school brought in senior basketball players who let the offenders know their conduct was unwelcome.

"These eighth-graders got a taste of what community is like at an early age," Roy said.

The IIRP aims to bring more educators and counselors into the philosophy through 30-credit graduate courses that started Sept. 9. Authorized June 26 to open by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the school bills itself as the first to offer master's degrees in restorative practices.

Wachtel and his wife, Susan, created the forerunner to the institute in 1977 when they founded the Community Service Foundation network of alternative-edu-

cation settings.

"Zero tolerance, the research is showing, actually alienates kids further and their families," Ted Wachtel said. "And so those schools that are beginning to use a policy that engages their kids and their families will start to see healthier school communities."

The philosophy has a ripple effect on higher standardized test scores and lower recidivism rates, according to research by the IIRP.

The institute shares space with the Bethlehem location of the Buxmont Academy. This sister agency of the Community Service Foundation has eight schools, 16 group homes and other programs for troubled youth from southeastern Pennsylvania.

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