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ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF CHANGE THROUGH EVIDENCE-BASED IMPLEMENTATION

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ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICES GRADUATE SCHOOL

All humans are hardwired to connect. Just as we need food, shelter, and clothing, human beings also need strong and meaningful relationships to thrive.

Restorative practices is a transdisciplinary field that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities.

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents 10 high leverage strategies focused on effective, holistic, and sustained implementation of restorative practices in K–12 settings. While restorative practices continues to expand, it faces myriad barriers to broad and sustained adoption. Grounded in principles of both implementation science and equity, this paper utilizes relevant research and practice insights from seasoned coaches to provide clear and proactive guidance for successful, long-term implementation in diverse contexts.

INTRODUCTION[1]

As the field of restorative practices continues to expand in schools globally, it has drawn increased attention from researchers and practitioners focused on substantiating emergent outcomes (Zakszeki & Rutherford, 2021). Much like evidence-based practices in other disciplines with strong theoretical foundations, the field is now grappling with predictable gaps between theory and practice, the *knowing-doing gap* (Greenhalgh et al., 2004). With generations of examples from diverse fields guided by science to inform best practice, from medicine to agriculture to juvenile justice, simply knowing *what works* is never sufficient to change practices and desired outcomes. Rather, implementation science, with its careful attention to an array of contextual variables, and understanding *what works where and under what conditions* (Damschroder et al., 2009), can drive successful outcomes.

To support its application within the field, this paper provides an overview of several essential concepts from implementation science (Eccles & Mittman, 2006) with an explicit focus on equitable application across a range of school contexts in K–12. It also presents 10 high leverage implementation strategies to prioritize in district and school teams' planning. These strategies were informed by an intentional balance (Lyon et al., 2020) of academic research (Berkowitz, 2012; Denver School Based Restorative Practice Partnership, 2017; Garnet et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2020; McIntosh, 2016) and direct interviews with seasoned school and district restorative practices leaders, instructors, researchers, and coaches with the impactful IIRP Whole School Change program (Augustine et al., 2018)[2], synthesizing their insights on successes and challenges spanning many decades in US school systems.[3] After a brief review of implementation and equity concepts, these strategies, summarized in Table 1, will each be described in more detail.

Translation between the knowledge of *what to do* and *how to do it* ("knowledge-to-practice") in the complicated settings of schools is rife with challenges that, unless addressed, can reinforce common myths about restorative practices. As highlighted in their analysis, Gregory and Evans (2020) identified five such challenges that can hinder the development of a positive school climate, and lead to 'mis-implementation.' These include: top-down restorative practices mandates with low levels of support; focusing too narrowly on a single practice or area of influence; ignoring the effects of race and power dynamics within a community; providing training with little follow up supports; and not providing sufficient levels of investment or long-term planning to support successful adoption. Implementation efforts need to be integrated throughout the school system, with clear plans for sustainability, and explicit attention to issues of race, power, and equity to promote the types of cultural changes that restorative practices urges (Hickman, 2022).

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1. This paper is adapted from Judge, D. (2026). Addressing the challenges of change through evidence-based implementation. In Chamblee, N., & Getty, J. (Eds.). *Restorative practices for educators: Research and applications.* IIRP Publications.
2. The IIRP Whole School Change (WSC) program, in various iterations beginning with the IIRP's model programs at Buxmont Academy and through to the Safer Saner Schools program, has supported hundreds of school districts and thousands of teachers and students across the US in implementing restorative practices for decades. Research informed the evolution of the program as it exists today, specifically the incorporation of greater program fidelity through multi-year training and targeted approaches such as coaching, leadership development, and differentiated supports for learners and leaders (Augustine, 2018; JHU, 2018; Gregory & Evans, 2020). The result is a comprehensive and proactive approach that has demonstrated successful outcomes over time.
3. In addition to relevant literature, insights for this paper were generously provided through interviews with the following faculty and staff of the IIRP Graduate School: Mike Azzalina, Instructor and Implementation Coach; Ryan Fenderson, Director of School-Based Implementation; Mary Jo Hebling, Dean of Continuing Education and Faculty Lecturer; Jennifer Hiestand, Instructor and Implementation Coach; Keith Hickman, Vice President for Partnerships, and Beth Smull, Director of Continuing Education. Also, Saundra Hensel, Behavioral Systems Manager, Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Kentucky, and Kent McIntosh, Professor and Director of Educational and Community Supports, University of Oregon College of Education.

KEY CONCEPTS OF IMPLEMENTATION SCIENCE

Although the systematic exploration of knowledge-to-practice gaps spans generations and disciplines, implementation science as a distinct field defined itself in 2006 as the study of applying research and evidence-based practices to improve quality and effectiveness of services (Eccles & Mittman). The breadth and cross-disciplinary nature of this field have generated a plethora of useful theories, tools, and concepts. To help restorative practitioners make the most of the recommendations of this paper, five key concepts from this field are each briefly defined below:

Innovations are generally the interventions, practices, or approaches that we are trying to implement well. In this case, the collection of restorative practices addressed throughout this text (i.e., affective statements, community-building circles, re-entry supports) would be considered the innovations.

A continuum of approaches to innovation can affect how we implement innovations and the resulting quality of a given practice. The most passive and unpredictable is ***diffusion***, where we 'let it happen'. ***Dissemination*** is where we 'help it happen' through targeted and negotiated distribution to specific audiences. And finally, ***implementation*** is our most active approach, where we 'make it happen' through strategic planning focused on broad and regulated adoption (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

Determinants are the variables that either help or hinder the successful implementation of an evidence-based innovation (Forman et al., 2009; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). These can be described as barriers versus facilitators, or risk vs. protective factors, and can include characteristics of the innovation itself, the setting in which it is being implemented, or the implementation process. For example, adult beliefs about behavior have a strong influence on their openness to explore or adopt a restorative classroom routine. If an adult embraces the concept that behavior is responsive to instruction and modifications of the classroom and school environment, they may eagerly embrace restorative innovations. However, if they believe behavior is simply rooted in individual morality, they may approach these same innovations with skepticism or resistance and never fully integrate them into their practice.

Mechanisms are malleable determinants that we target in planning implementation strategies (Lyon & Bruns, 2019), essentially mechanisms operationalize the chosen strategies. For example, a powerful *determinant* influencing the success of restorative initiatives is external state and federal funding, something over which school districts have little influence. To exercise agency and maximize funding as an influential *mechanism* within fixed budgets, restorative leaders could focus on a *strategy* of elevating restorative initiatives as a priority within existing budgets through the planning process at the school and district level.

Strategies are the selected methods used to implement evidence-based practices. As such, they provide a guide to improve the likelihood of successful and sustained implementation and offer measurable approaches to inform strategic planning and monitoring efforts. The 10 recommended strategies for implementing restorative practices (see Table 1) are within our locus of control and focus on curating agency amongst stakeholders at all levels to 'make' restorative efforts succeed.

CENTERING EQUITY

Decades of research confirms that students who exhibit the same types of behaviors are repeatedly and consistently treated differently by US schools based on aspects of their identities, resulting in disproportionate rates of exclusionary punishment for those who are Black, Hispanic, Native American, male, LGBTQ+, from low-income families, or receive special education services (Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). Restorative practices has the potential to disrupt these stratified and disproportionate outcomes and replace punitive practices with those grounded in community and healthy relationships. Effective implementation requires that we grapple with the inequities in our local contexts to inform planning and ensure that *all* students and adults get what they need to thrive. A 2021 synthesis by Baumann & Long provides three strong starting points for centering such considerations in implementation planning.

1. **Engage directly with historically underserved community members.** Grapple with the negative impacts of historical patterns on students and families in the school community through routine examination of outcome data and storytelling. Engage in shared decision making with those most impacted by restorative practices by centering their voices as members of Restorative Leadership Teams (see Strategy 8, below) and collecting their substantive and ongoing input on restorative practices implementation processes and impacts.

2. **Implement and measure interventions with the greatest long-term benefits.** School-based experiences and outcomes, such as literacy rates, social emotional development, and graduation attainment have significant impacts on life-long health, longevity, and economic opportunity. Choose restorative practices skills and supports that students can use in as many settings as possible, including post-secondary education, community, and vocational settings, and engage students and families in making these choices.

3. **Identify strategies that emphasize improving the conditions and structures in schools through policy reform, rather than focusing upon student responses to inequitable systems.** The equity gaps and patterns in schools that often drive initial interest in restorative practices result from longstanding structural influences and ineffective policies, so reform strategies should address these policies directly.

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

The 10 strategies below support educators with varying levels of influence in moving from diffusion ("letting it happen") to implementation ("making it happen"). These are presented in a general sequential order, acknowledging that schools are in various stages of implementation, and that this process is often iterative, with improvement taking place through repetition and critical reflection. A central guiding principle for systematic implementation across all mechanisms is applying the "with" approach to organizations, intentionally pairing high accountability and high support.

TABLE 1. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

1. Assess the school community's readiness for change.
2. Apply research-based integration practices using implementation science.
3. Connect restorative practices to mission, goals, and strategic planning.
4. Connect restorative practices to existing institutional frameworks, philosophies, and initiatives.
5. Adopt a social-ecological model of implementation: Begin with self, extend to others, apply to systems.
6. Focus on adult climate and culture first.
7. Plan for measurement of comprehensive community impacts and meeting of equity goals.
8. Build capacity and ownership by targeting a broad representation of educators for initial training and implementation planning.
9. Plan for implementation across the "prevention continuum."
10. Create a sustainability plan focused on anticipating future challenges.

Strategy 1: Assess the school community's readiness for change.
Many successful districts have developed formal and informal readiness criteria for schools to complete before launching restorative practices. Formally, some school teams use staff surveys to measure adult attitudes towards punitive discipline, tension for change, or readiness to invest in new instructional approaches to community, relationships, social skills, or academic integration of restorative practices. Informally, school leaders can assess the level of acceptance or pushback for other schoolwide initiatives as a gauge for whether to launch restorative practices. These might include positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), Social Emotional Learning (SEL), trauma-informed teaching, or common instructional or behavioral routines. Implementing restorative practices can be difficult work under the best of circumstances, and encouraging a participatory decision-making process can maximize educator readiness. If assessments indicate that the school system is not ready, encourage leaders to continue to build awareness, trust, urgency for change, and appropriate adult support systems before launching. For example, leaders can pair the routine dissemination and review of persistent equity gap data with the routine spotlighting of teachers and schools that are embracing innovative restorative supports.

Strategy 2: Apply research-based integration practices using implementation science.
Readiness for change is only one of many factors that can inhibit or support restorative practices success. Implementation science provides more than 140 theories, models, and frameworks (Wang et al., 2023) for

interrogating the complex factors at play. One helpful approach to get started is to select a previously successful innovation and collectively identify as many factors as possible that led to its success. What was it about the innovation itself that seemed to help: the cost, adaptability, familiarity, readiness, integration with existing practices, or its fit with students or culture? What factors, or determinants, within the setting assisted in its success: sense of urgency, eagerness for change, budget, or political climate? What aspects of the process for adopting the innovation were positive: collective buy-in, teacher voice and choice, or pacing? In addition to the 10 strategies shared here, encourage schools to learn from previous experiences with implementation.

Strategy 3: Connect restorative practices to mission, goals, and strategic planning.
Districts that make restorative practices initiatives widely known as a high priority are more likely to invest the time and resources to make sure they happen. At their best, restorative approaches address systems-level challenges and persistent equity gaps, and teachers are more likely to try new approaches when the connections between daily interactions with colleagues and students are a part of broader systemic goals. Effective leaders model the use of restorative practices to increase staff voice and agency. They are visible and engaged at training events, celebrate restorative practices initiatives, gains and lessons learned, and provide clear sponsorship to all stakeholders to be creative in their efforts. In addition to this level of support, accountability measures for adult implementation are predictable, reasonable, and clear.

Strategy 4: Connect restorative practices to existing institutional frameworks, philosophies, and initiatives.
In response to the recurring cycle of the introduction of new instructional methods, teaching tools, curricula, and assessments, often without clear rationale or required supports, many promising or evidence-based practices fail as a result of what educators describe as *initiative fatigue* (Reeves, 2010). To plan for this, make explicit how your restorative practices align with, deepen, or extend other systems and supports. For example, illustrate the alignment between restorative practices and trauma-informed or culturally responsive teaching practices. Building upon what is already in place increases understanding and enthusiasm, leverages prior knowledge, and offers restorative practices as a deepening, extension, or enhancement of current institutional or cultural assets.

Pay careful attention to alignment across initiatives and create "crosswalk" documents that make these connections explicit. An excellent example is the Tiered Fidelity Inventory – Restorative Practices (Sprague & Tobin, 2017) which integrates emergent restorative practices within the validated and broadly utilized PBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI). Another highly relevant example is the Restorative Practices and SEL Alignment document that was developed by the IIRP and CASEL (CASEL, 2020). Importantly for each of these, be sure to identify and explain points of divergence. Any perceptions of competition or conflict with accepted language or practices will undermine restorative practices priorities.

Strategy 5: Adopt a social-ecological model of implementation: Begin with self, extend to others, apply to systems.
Restorative initiatives can become stuck when educators occupying different roles within schools or districts presume that the primary responsibility for implementation lies with others. This type of opposition can derail restorative practices because effective implementation requires parties across departments and roles to take ownership within their sphere of influence. Interdependence between adults is essential to restorative practices planning, and the curation of agency among all parties is a central consideration. To do so, it is helpful to utilize a social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) of implementation that situates the individual at the center of an ever-expanding set of circles of influence and connectivity: begin implementation with yourself, then expand out to others, and eventually to systems.

Strategy 6: Focus on adult climate and culture first.
Restorative practices encompasses both a way of doing and a way of being. Specifically, it provides a continuum of essential restorative practices elements (doing) and helps us rethink not only how to build and sustain relationships and learning communities, but also how to prevent and heal from conflict that is inherent in human interactions (being). To develop both competencies, it is recommended to begin restorative practices implementation with adults before launching with students. When administrators use proactive and responsive restorative practices to build community and repair harm among school staff, teachers understand the power of adopting a more relational approach and are more likely to try it in their classrooms. With practice, these approaches to working with students in a restorative way also transform power dynamics in classrooms, curating a new *way of being* for educators. When educators experience these powerful shifts, their ownership of restorative practices increases, as does their ability to personalize and innovate to fit unique contexts. Over time, this evolution supports sustainability, as these educators become the best ambassadors for keeping the work alive. IIRP Vice President Keith Hickman, who has led implementation in numerous large school systems, summarized this powerful phenomenon:

> "Restorative practices has endured because people have made it their own. They see its impact and utility, then take ownership of it. Restorative practices is not a program—it's essential to be clear on that. At its core, it is a pedagogical practice, a choice to integrate it into one's identity and approach. While many factors influence this work, the most important question is: What feeds your soul? What drives you to make this happen?"

Strategy 7: Plan for measurement of comprehensive community impacts and meeting of equity goals.
Restorative practices measurement plans should include at least these three components: adult implementation, adult outcomes, and student outcomes. Before we can measure targeted student, staff, or climate outcomes, it is critical that we measure fidelity of adult implementation of restorative practices (Durlak, 2010). One of the

reasons the highly effective PBIS framework (Lee et al., 2021; Walker et al., 1996) is so broadly implemented in US schools is that its tiered components are all observable, and thus measurable. When building a restorative practices implementation plan, for each outcome, ask *what will this look like? How will we measure success? How often will we check for fidelity?* Apply this approach to restorative practices teaming structures, professional development, coaching, walkthrough tools, tiered fidelity inventories (Sprague & Tobin, 2017), universal and targeted behavior and wellness screeners, lesson plans, and stakeholder communication plans. Ensure that your equity process and outcome measures are primary, not supplemental, and that they include measures reflecting substantive, diverse and representative community, family, and student participation in decision making.

Strategy 8: Build capacity and ownership by targeting a broad representation of educators for initial training and implementation planning.
Many instructors and implementation coaches advise that school systems new to restorative practices invest their entire first year in training all district leaders, with representatives from all departments, including teaching and learning, operations, athletics, human resources, support services, and business services. Once high-level administrators (district or regional leaders) have learned about and applied restorative practices principles with their own teams, midlevel leaders (school principals and directors) are integrated, followed by teachers and staff. This ensures that leaders experience the restorative approach firsthand, build their own fluency in modelling its application, are visible in integrating restorative practices into their own leadership, and are familiar with some of the challenges inherent when disrupting more traditional practices. This approach also publicly demonstrates high-level ownership and adoption of restorative practices, proactively addressing the skepticism that often accompanies new initiatives.

Establishing a Restorative Leadership Team (RLT) that includes a broad representation of adults and students with formal and informal leadership roles and influence is strongly recommended. At the school level, this team should include a school administrator with formal evaluative authority (i.e., principal or assistant principal), any non-instructional staff who lead discipline efforts (i.e., dean of students, dean of climate/culture) a representative sample of teachers from various grade levels and departments, a representative of key paraeducators engaged in student supports, as well as family members and ideally students. The RLT shares the coaching and implementation workload, adapts core components to unique settings, advocates for the work within their spheres of influence, and exchanges key information with staff to inform ongoing training and supports. As often as possible, RLT members should shadow and co-facilitate training and coaching opportunities with outside providers to build internal leadership capacity.

Strategy 9: Plan for implementation across the "prevention continuum."
While the social-ecological model is essential for developing agency in adults as they personally adopt and lead restorative practices, a holistic and prevention-based approach should be used when designing interventions across a school system. In alignment with similar prevention models, 80% of a school's energies should be directed toward proactive and universal (Tier 1) approaches that are rooted in developing strong relationships, using positive affective statements, and creating supportive, predictable, structured communities with culturally rich and relevant curriculum and pedagogy. Tier 1 instruction should emphasize social and emotional learning skills and integrate restorative practices into academic content delivery and review. This creates a foundation of connection for subsequent responsive restorative innovations targeting 15% of students at the group level or Tier 2 or 5% of individuals at the Tier 3 level.

Strategy 10: Create a sustainability plan focused on anticipating future challenges.
In addition to the initial investments in leadership teams described above, school teams that have managed

to sustain momentum and focus on restorative practices over time embed capacity building into their implementation planning from the start. Community disruption can be caused by shifts in funding, or by the arrivals and departures of influential and charismatic educators and administrators. Given the predictability of these patterns of disruption, a summary of effective approaches for planning for sustainability is provided below.

- Have leaders, along with internal coaches or trainers, shadow and co-facilitate any training provided by external coaches or instructors. This explicit and early focus on building internal capacity, infrastructure, and a cadre of trainers helps maximize the impacts of exposure to any expertise from the start.
- Establish an internal improvement network to support midlevel leadership structures (teacher leaders, central office or school-based specialists, coaches), with consistent meeting times, shared repositories for training materials, and time and space to refine training content and methods to ensure that training on restorative practices retains core components throughout dissemination.
- Offer an array of predictable training opportunities for staff in various roles with varied purposes (e.g., onboarding, refreshers, reboots, make-ups); and using various modalities (e.g., live, synchronous, asynchronous) to maximize access.
- Embed restorative practices training into staff meetings and professional development throughout the year in small, digestible parts to encourage ongoing reflection and incorporation.
- When possible, pair professional development with coaching to allow for practice and feedback.

Lastly, account for educator bandwidth and capacity, given the flurry of competing demands on attention and energy. Saundra Hensel, who has led the implementation of restorative practices in a large district of more than 150 schools since 2016, elevates the connection between smart planning around implementation and remaining focused on what we know works.

> "Always have that mindset of capacity building and sustainability… making sure you're thinking about what's next, what do we need to provide to schools to make it as easy as possible for them to implement? We can't add more, they have so much on their plates already; they can't feel like something is going to be a burden, or they aren't going to do it. How can we make things as easy as possible while still doing what we know is best for kids?"

CONCLUSION

The promise of the restorative approach in schools is immense, and we have learned a great deal about successful implementation. As adults aspiring to live, teach, and lead in a more restorative way, our greatest charge is *ownership of the ecosystems we create* in learning communities, as well as the resulting student and adult outcomes they produce. We must move away from pinning blame for misbehavior on individuals and toward nurturing our own agency in shaping the environments and experiences that impact behaviors. By courageously and strategically attending to these theoretical and practical insights, schools can avoid reinforcing some of the unfortunate myths that have emerged because of partial or rushed implementation and better fulfill restorative practices' promise for our schools.

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