

Working through problems

BASD officials explain the use of restorative practices

By AMY HERZOG
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Several Lehigh Valley school administrators participated at the 16th World Conference of the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) at the Hotel Bethlehem recently. They spoke in a panel about their experiences with restorative practices in schools.

Superintendent of Bethlehem schools Dr. Joseph Roy was joined by Liberty HS Principal Harrison Bailey and Freedom HS Principal Mike LaPorta in speaking about the implementation of restorative practices in the district's schools and the affects it has had on school environment and disciplinary actions.

Restorative practices involve restoring and developing social capital, social discipline, emotional well-being and civic participation through participatory learning and decision-making. The premise? People are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes when those in authority do things with them, rather than to or for them, according to the IIRP website.

District results

Using this approach in schools has resulted in lower disciplinary rates and fewer calls to the police. Its use can also change the school environment. Surveyed students have reported feeling safer in school.

Roy gave an overview of his introduction and use of restorative practices in the schools he has overseen.

When Roy first joined the district, he faced a lot of challenges, including a difficult school board and teachers focused on the punitive side of the code of conduct rather than the positives. By using



PRESS PHOTO BY AMY HERZOG

Bethlehem Superintendent Dr. Joseph Roy, center, speaks on a panel during a conference on restorative practices in schools at the Hotel Bethlehem. The conference was run by the International Institute for Restorative Practices which is based in Bethlehem.

the whole school approach, he was able to train all of the teachers and staff and refocus the code of conduct.

The principals have sent a strong message that this is what the schools are going to do now and have stuck to that message during instances that have tested the new system, with positive results. The code of conduct is also being rebooted so punitive measures are not the only focus. So far, restorative practices are working and the district is moving in the right direction.

"You can't expel your way to safer schools," Roy said.

Liberty's use

Following Roy's remarks, Bailey and LaPorta spoke about how restorative practices were implemented in their schools and the difference it has made in the school culture and the rate of disciplinary actions that occur. Joining the LHS staff Bailey recognized that there were some communication and relationship breakdowns that

needed to be fixed if they were going to get anywhere with the students, Bailey said. Teachers started to get on board when they saw this was what he was going to do.

"It got to the point where we really transformed the school," Bailey said.

Everyone on staff and the students take an active role in making this approach to discipline and school culture work. For Bailey, all his meetings occur in circles. When during the first year of implementation things were not going as well as hoped, the restorative practices were worked into the health curriculum to create a greater sense of investment and involvement among the students and the personal learning groups for teachers focused on better communication. These changes created a better sense of involvement and

buy in from the teachers and students, Bailey said.

"We control the destiny of our schools," he added.

Freedom's use

Freedom's principal followed that up with an example of how well these practices have worked for the Bethlehem schools. Shortly after restorative practices were implemented at FHS, a small group of seniors committed an act of vandalism. The entire school watched to see how LaPorta would handle the incident. Would he prevent them from walking in their graduation ceremony?

He called a meeting with all the parties involved - the teachers, the victims (in this case the janitors), the students, and himself. It was decided during the conference that the students would apologize to the janitors, attend a faculty meeting

and apologize to the faculty, come back the following year and talk to students about making bad choices, and perform 100 hours of community service.

All the students were allowed to walk in the graduation ceremony. That caused some of the teachers to consider boycotting the ceremony. LaPorta called another meeting with the teachers to resolve the possible boycott and in the end the boycott did not happen and the entire school community was able to enjoy graduation.

This incident was a defining moment for Freedom and restorative practices. Now, when they have a problem, they circle up and tackle it, LaPorta said. The school has seen a reduction in student consequences such as arrest, expulsion and suspension. And 90 percent of students in the building have reported that they feel safer in school.

Restorative practices at FHS are teaching the students how to work through their problems and handle their business the right way, developing skills that will follow them into college and the workforce.

"We have seen a complete cultural change and that is a good thing," LaPorta said.

A question and answer period followed the panel's talk and many of the speakers from across the world commended the panelists on their good work and the positive benefits their schools are seeing from implementing restorative practices.

"What I heard is an inspiration," said Gregor Rae, of Aberdeen Scotland.