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## Restoring Justice for Safer Schools

The experts describe it as increasing the social capital of schools. Administrators talk of an incredibly powerful tool. Principals and teachers call it a breath of fresh air, and students say, “This is way better than suspensions!”

Can restorative justice succeed where traditional discipline has fallen short?

by Melodie McCullough

In schools across the province, restorative justice is catching on as a progressive approach for addressing bullying, vandalism, conflict and other discipline problems. Whether as an alternative to zero tolerance or as a way to reduce repeat offences and keep kids in school, the principles and techniques seem to be helping some schools to be safer places for learning.

“It’s a really powerful process to repair a harm, so students can go back into the classroom community and have positive relationships and put the incident behind them,” says Sean Ruddy, who was vice-principal at Almaguin Highlands Secondary School last year, a rural school of 750 students in South River, 60 kilometres south of North Bay. The school has been using restorative practices for the past two years.

“It’s easy to deal with an incident by suspending the student,” says Ruddy. “But they come back three or five days later, and there’s nothing to prevent it from happening again. We wanted to reduce that chance, and in fact there’s been a zero recidivism rate.”



Vice-principal Sean Ruddy,  
West Ferris Secondary  
School in North Bay

As its name implies, restorative justice aims to restore relationships. It moves away from traditional discipline, which responds to an offender with a punishment meted out by an authority from above. By requiring wrongdoers to face their victims, consider the impact of their behaviour, and come up with a way to make amends, it holds them accountable for their actions and gives victims a voice. The focus is on long-term healing for all affected and reintegrating offenders back into the school community.

Restorative justice uses peer mediation, healing circles and, at its most formal,

group conferences. These methods can address a wide range of issues: bullying and harassment, vandalism, swearing at teachers, fighting, assault, theft and weapon offences. Sometimes the process replaces suspensions and sometimes it runs alongside them. It is useful for incidents between students, between students and teachers or between students and other staff.

Restorative practices, which have long been part of North American aboriginal justice systems, have more recently gained acceptance in the Canadian judicial system with the inclusion of conferencing in the Youth Criminal Justice Act.

According to Ruddy, restorative conferences typically start with an interview with the victim and offender. In schools, a conference is set up at a neutral site where victim and offender meet face to face in a circle, each with support people (usually parents), plus a facilitator, vice-principal and sometimes a police liaison. These latter three have all been trained in restorative justice practices. Others affecte

**“Instead of being punitive, we bring offenders back into the community with an agreement to move forward.”**

d by the incident, such as friends, bus drivers or custodians may also be present.

Offenders and victims alike are asked questions about what happened, what they were thinking, who was affected and what needs to be done to make things right.

“You go around the room and everyone has a chance to explain their feelings and how they’ve been impacted, and we come up with some kind of resolution,” says Ruddy. “Instead of being punitive, we bring offenders back into the community with an agreement to move forward. Depending on the incident, there can be really simple solutions, or it could be more serious, like anger counselling.

“But the resolution comes about with the participation and agreement of everybody, and is not something done to the person involved. That way, everyone in the circle can hold the person accountable for the resolution.”

Food is on hand for an actual and metaphoric breaking of bread. When a resolution is reached, participants have snacks while the facilitator draws up an agreement that will be signed. A few weeks later there is a follow-up.

The program has been such a success at Almaguin Highlands that the school decided to supplement it by launching a peer-mediation program based on restorative theories. Twenty students have been trained as facilitators to mediate conflicts between students before they reach the vice-principal’s office.

Peterborough Collegiate and Vocational School (PCVS) was the first secondary school in the Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB to introduce restorative practices – in February 2006. Now, every one of the board’s elementary and secondary schools has trained staff on hand, a first in the province, it says.



Principal Assistant to the Director of Education and former Peterborough Collegiate and Vocational School (PCVS) principal Anita Simpson and PCVS teacher Simon Weigh, Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB

At PCVS, teacher Simon Weigh describes how a conference was used to restore broken trust between teachers and students after a class trip to New York, where the supervising teacher spent a night in hospital with a student with a broken nose. The story of how it happened came out later. The students had ignored curfew and were socializing and pillow fighting, with boys and girls in the same room. Five students faced suspensions.

But the students didn't understand why it was "a big deal," says Weigh, so the teachers requested a restorative circle. After listening for three hours to the teachers explain how their trust had been broken and how they wouldn't feel comfortable ever taking kids on another field trip, the students finally "got it."

"It worked out well," Weigh adds, "because they realized that it wasn't just them being teenagers and having fun. There was a turning point when they heard some of the emotion from their teachers. It was good to see that."

The students remarked that if they had merely been suspended, they wouldn't have cared or learned anything. As part of the resolution, they agreed to talk to other students taking field trips. In return, they received the teachers' forgiveness.

Anita Simpson, who was PCVS principal until September of this year, says that initially the school held public meetings and student assemblies to explain restorative practices. While a full-blown conference is the "most formal tool" of the restorative process, she sees it as part of a continuum of techniques used throughout the whole school on a daily basis, suffusing the school culture. Simpson says that teachers use the methods often – both in and outside the classroom – and with great success.

**"I have no faith that suspensions teach students emotional and social skills, which is what they're missing."**

"I think it's about using a common language when dealing with harm or a wrongdoing," she says.

That's something David Smith of the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, who has researched anti-bullying school programs, sees as important in making restorative justice work in schools.

"Restorative justice is not simply a set of techniques," says Smith. "It's a whole way of being in relationship with people. If you don't have the mindset to begin with, the strategies won't work."

The Waterloo Region DSB is seen as a leader in restorative programs, which are now in their fifth year at most of its schools. Schools continue to find

imaginative ways to involve the whole school community, says Lynn Zammit, co-ordinator of its restorative justice project.

When students are sent to the office, they fill out sheets that require them to reflect on what went wrong, who was hurt and how it can be remedied, she says. There's also the Making Amends program where, instead of being suspended, students reflect for an entire day on the incident and its impact. The school board has provided restorative training to the 100 police officers from the Waterloo Region Police Services who work in area schools. Zammit's contribution to the project's success was recognized in May by a provincial Attorney General's Victim Services Award of Distinction.



Restorative justice project  
co-ordinator Lynn Zammit,  
Waterloo Region DSB

In Catholic schools, the restorative approach fits the criteria of the Ontario Catholic School Graduate Expectations.

"It allows victims to have a voice, and it fits with the philosophy of Catholic education and the whole idea of bringing together people who have been harmed with those who have done the harm, and offering them the opportunity for forgiveness and reparation," says Ann-Marie Deas, a social worker with the Bruce-Grey Catholic DSB, which partners with the Bluewater DSB and the Owen Sound Family YMCA in restorative-measures conferencing.

The provincial government also finds restorative practices worthwhile, and has provided money for the Kawartha Pine Ridge DSB's program through the Ministry of Education's model project funding.

"The Ministry is always keen on having people share best practices and equipping administrators, teachers and principals to apply those in schools," says Ministry spokesperson Patricia MacNeil. "Restorative practices would be one of those best practices."

While some critics say the approach is permissive, supporters are quick to respond.

"Anybody who says that has never sat in a circle, because it's probably the toughest thing a kid could have to do. It's an incredibly powerful process to sit, sometimes for two or three hours, and hear in intimate detail of the grief you've caused people," says Zammit.

Administrators say the hard data isn't there yet to show whether or how well restorative justice is working, but there have been plenty of positive stories. And Zammit reports that, in the Waterloo board, suspensions are down.

"I have no faith that suspensions teach students emotional and social skills, which is what they're missing in the first place that's causing the problems. We are in the education business, so I would like to think that, even in the most

severe cases of school discipline, there's still an opportunity to be educators and to teach.”

#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

*Social Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman (Bantam, ISBN 978-0-553-38449-9)

*Restoring Safe School Communities* by Brenda Morrison (Irwin Law, ISBN 978-1-86287-477-0)

Centre for Restorative Justice at Simon Fraser University, [www.sfu.ca/crj](http://www.sfu.ca/crj)

Waterloo Region DSB, [www.wrdsb.on.ca](http://www.wrdsb.on.ca)

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Ontario College of Teachers

121 Bloor Street East, Toronto Ontario M4W 3M5

T 416-961-8800 F 416-961-8822 Toll-Free 1-888-534-2222

[www.oct.ca](http://www.oct.ca) | [info@oct.ca](mailto:info@oct.ca)