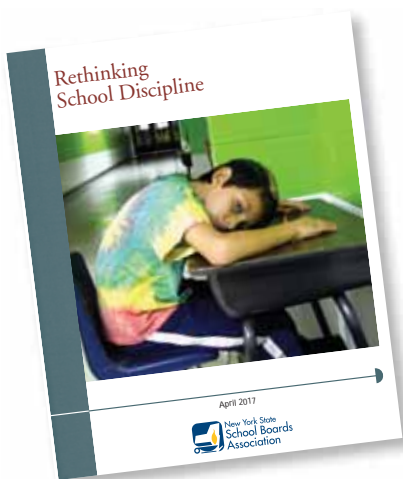


# Rethinking School Discipline



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This NYSSBA research report was researched and written by **Gayle Simidian, Ed.D.**, research analyst. It was edited by **David Albert**, director of communications, marketing, and research. It was designed by **Karen Ward**, principal of Creative Connections NY.

# Rethinking School Discipline

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# I. Introduction

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*During the first few weeks of the school year, Amy, Mike and Jason would stroll into Ms. Gorham's 9th grade English classroom ten minutes late. This tardiness interrupted the beginning of each lesson, so Ms. Gorham would have to reiterate the points she made during the students' absence to the entire class again.*

*The students know when class starts, thought Ms. Gorham. When the behavior first started to occur, she told them that it was unacceptable to be late to class so often. So, she didn't see the need in repeating the rules of classroom behavior each morning when they slinked into the back of the room at ten past the hour. Initially, she was stumped about what to do.*

*Then, shortly thereafter, she began incorporating a practice in her class that some of her colleagues told her about that helped all of her students, including Amy, Mike and Jason, get on the same page with class expectations, understand each other better and . . . yes, show up to class on time. And, the practice alleviated the need to resort to sending Amy, Mike and Jason to the principal's office to face potential detention or even suspension.*

What practice did she use? She began incorporating restorative circles into her teaching repertoire. Restorative circles are opportunities for community members (i.e., classroom students) to convene to discuss how harm from a misbehavior or deed (i.e., chronic tardiness) affects others in the class and how that harm can be fixed. The circle itself is a catalyst to relationship-building between students and the teacher and, also, between students and students.<sup>1</sup>

Restorative circles are one of the most commonly used practices of restorative justice – a philosophical stance on discipline that aims to restore relationships once damage has been done, rather than rely on punitive actions like suspensions to reduce problematic behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Restorative justice is difficult to define, according to research, but it is a disciplinary approach that empowers all affected persons of a transgression by bringing the affected persons (i.e. victim, offender, community members) together to understand each other better by addressing reasons why the transgression happened, how it made each person feel, and seeking to address a way to mend the damage.<sup>3</sup> Sessions are led by trained staff for different levels of restorative justice implementation.<sup>4</sup>

Restorative justice is a rather contemporary method of school discipline. The first use of it in a school setting is widely believed to have occurred in Australia in 1994. Prior to its application in U.S. schools, restorative practices were commonly used in criminal justice settings. The advent of restorative justice in U.S. schools began as a response to the negative effects of zero-tolerance policies and the awareness of a disparate impact of suspensions and expulsions on minority and special need students.<sup>5</sup>

Attorney General Eric T. Schneiderman's recent investigations into school discipline strategies statewide due to data indicating high student suspension rates, especially for students of color and other minority students, have prompted an interest in restorative justice, which keeps students in school. Suspensions isolate students, and, according to the Attorney General's office, lower student performance, affect dropout rates and can even set students up for an eventual life in prison. This reasoning led to his 2014 decision that the Syracuse City School District "amend its Code of Conduct to adopt or encourage the use of disciplinary strategies that do not rely on exclusion as a form of discipline, except as a last resort."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Karp, D. Communication with G. Simidian. March 2017. For additional information about restorative justice training and implementation see the following: Oakland Unified School District. Restorative Justice Implementation Guide: A Whole School Approach. . . . <http://rjoakland.org/wp-content/uploads/OUSDRJOY-Implementation-Guide.pdf>.

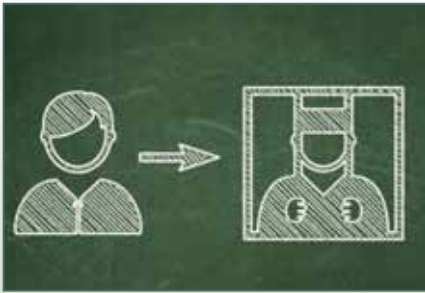
<sup>5</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Office of the New York Attorney General. A.G. Schneiderman Announces Agreement Addressing School Discipline Issues in Syracuse. July 10, 2014. <https://ag.ny.gov/press-release/ag-schneiderman-announces-agreement-addressing-school-discipline-issues-syracuse>.

## II. Restorative Justice in Action

### Why Choose Restorative Justice?

The attraction of restorative justice for use in school discipline is multi-fold:



1. Students are less likely to end up in the school-to-prison pipeline;



2. Restorative justice reduces any disparate impact of suspensions and/or expulsions on minority students<sup>7</sup>; and,



3. Students actively participate in their own disciplinary process, so they are partial owners of the process, which, says a February 2016 WestEd Report, helps them view the school disciplinary system as just.

Restorative justice practices emphasize understanding the perspectives of others and provide an opportunity to gain social-emotional learning (SEL) skills such as empathy and an awareness of others' perspectives, which exclusionary disciplinary practices, like suspensions, don't allow.<sup>8</sup> By honing SEL skills, restorative justice allows for "teachable" lessons for students.<sup>9</sup>

Restorative justice also allays many of the negative effects associated with more traditional disciplinary methods. According to research, zero-tolerance policies and school officer programs often lead to what is termed the school-to-prison pipeline. By opting for restorative justice, schools don't rely on disciplinary tactics like suspensions that may, ultimately, make it more likely that a student will end up in prison.<sup>10</sup>

### Restorative Inquiry

In contrast to suspensions and expulsions, restorative justice provides students with a voice in their own disciplinary process and a way to reflect on their own feelings and those of others through a process called restorative inquiry. Restorative inquiry is a line of questioning by school personnel to students that makes students aware of their underlying feelings and motives related to a specific misbehavior or incident. This allows the process of mending relationships to begin.<sup>11</sup> This line of inquiry often happens in a restorative circle. The inquiry process by school personnel to students might include questions like those below:

*"How were you feeling at the time?"*

*"How are you feeling now?"*

*"Who else was affected by this?"*

*"What do you need to do to make things right?"*

*"How can we support you?"<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> African-American k-12 students are suspended 3.8 times more than their white peers. U.S. Dept. of Education. 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look. Revised October 28, 2016. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/2013-14-first-look.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report/>. p.7.

<sup>10</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. Teaching Tolerance: Restoring Justice. Number 47; Summer 2014. <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-47-summer-2014/feature/restoring-justice>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQWNYs4QSao>. Southern Poverty Law Center. Teaching Tolerance: Toolkit for Restoring Justice. <http://www.tolerance.org/toolkit/toolkit-restoring-justice>.

<sup>13</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center. Teaching Tolerance: Restoring Justice. Number 47; Summer 2014. <http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/number-47-summer-2014/feature/restoring-justice>.

### *Restorative Justice Embedded in Curriculum*

In addition to using restorative circles for intervention purposes, teachers can use them in the curriculum as an everyday strategy to help students reflect on an array of issues and build a stronger classroom community. For example, Amy Bintliff, a Wisconsin teacher who received the 2014 Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching, uses restorative circles in her day-to-day teaching for a variety of reasons, including building bonds between school personnel such as teachers and students. Topics for these circles vary, and may relate to “inequities, bullying and conflicts within their classes,” according to Bintliff. Teachers, she notes, may then “create action plans to help alleviate the stressors in their lives and intercept systemic injustices.”<sup>14</sup>



Other commonly used restorative justice techniques besides restorative circles are mediation/peer mediation and group conferencing. In addition, peer juries, which are courts of one’s peers that listen to cases about students’ transgressions and provide next steps for students to mend relationships are also used, but less often than circles, peer mediation or group conferencing,<sup>15</sup> and are even thought by some not to be a restorative justice practice since the perpetrator is the focus of this practice, not the victim.<sup>16</sup>

### *Mediation/Peer Mediation*

Mediation is a restorative practice in which a “neutral third party” (in the case of peer mediation, someone of the same peer-age group) works with two students to facilitate resolution to a conflict. Both students must be on equal footing for the mediation to work. For example, mediation doesn’t work well to eradicate bullying

since the students involved (i.e. bully and victim) are not on equal footing.<sup>17</sup> For mediation to work, students must be developmentally able to cognitively process the mediation, so it’s more effective for high school students than for students in lower grades.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, according to research, this type of restorative justice helps the mediator most because the mediator becomes better at conflict resolution. So, it’s important to note that students are sometimes less able than adults to effectively mediate.<sup>19</sup>

### *Group Conferencing*

Like mediation, group conferencing involves facilitation by a mediator, but unlike mediation, group conferencing involves all individuals involved in a dispute<sup>20</sup>, along with those that support them (e.g. family, community members).<sup>21</sup> All affected parties have a voice in the discussion of what transpired and how it can be resolved through a formal plan.<sup>22</sup> Group conferencing also involves a check-in by the facilitator after the session to confirm that the aggressor in the situation is following through on the agreed upon resolutions.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bintliff, Amy. Teaching Tolerance. Talking Circles: For Restorative Justice and Beyond. July 22, 2014. Southern Law Poverty Center. <http://www.tolerance.org/blog/talking-circles-restorative-justice-and-beyond>.

<sup>15</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Practitioners’ Perspectives. January 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RVJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8\\_20160120PC.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RVJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8_20160120PC.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report/>.

<sup>17</sup> Minnesota Department of Education. Trainer’s Guide for Working with Schools to Implement Restorative Practices. August 2016. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/safe/clim/prac/>.

<sup>18</sup> Students in lower grades may benefit more from restorative chats which is a brief discussion between two students directed by an adult who aids the discussion by clarifying the connection between emotion and behavior for the student who misbehaved. Ibid. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/safe/clim/prac/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority. Implementing Restorative Justice: A Guide for Schools. 2009. <http://www.icjia.state.il.us/publications/implementing-restorative-justice-a-guide-for-schools>.

<sup>21</sup> National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention. An Introduction to Restorative Justice. October 2009. [http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/restorative\\_justice\\_0.pdf](http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/restorative_justice_0.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Minnesota Department of Education. Trainer’s Guide for Working with Schools to Implement Restorative Practices. August 2016. <http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/safe/clim/prac/>.

<sup>23</sup> National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention. An Introduction to Restorative Justice. October 2009. [http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/restorative\\_justice\\_0.pdf](http://www.promoteprevent.org/sites/www.promoteprevent.org/files/resources/restorative_justice_0.pdf).

# III. Effectiveness of Restorative Justice

## Does Restorative Justice Work?

What is restorative justice's impact on school discipline, school attendance, school climate and academic performance? It's difficult to say. Most studies of restorative justice don't employ "rigorous empirical tests" including control groups, for example, so their validity is questionable. Other studies present more qualitative findings, which are helpful, but not comprehensive. Overall, restorative justice studies, to date, present encouraging findings about its effects on school discipline, school attendance, school climate and academic performance, but more research needs to be done.<sup>24</sup>

A review of studies related to restorative justice and its impact on school discipline shows that restorative justice programs in schools yield less exclusionary discipline such as out-of-school suspensions, and they also reduce the number of violent acts in schools. Examples include a sizeable reduction in exclusionary discipline (84 percent) for 11-12 year-olds in a Texas middle school; close to a 50 percent drop in schools in Denver; and a whopping 87 percent decrease in a middle school in Oakland, California. In addition, a high school in Philadelphia noted that in year one of employing restorative justice in the school, violence plummeted in half, followed by another 40 percent dip after six more months of using restorative justice. Another study of an alternative education setting in Pennsylvania that uses restorative justice showed less student offenses (58 percent) soon after implementation, which stayed relatively stable (50 percent) during the first couple of years of employing it in the setting.<sup>25</sup>

Restorative justice programs also have a positive impact on student absenteeism. For example, a 2014 study of middle schools in Oakland, California shows that, on average, schools that used restorative justice experienced a 24 percent decrease in chronic absenteeism, while schools that didn't use restorative justice saw a 62 percent rise in chronic absenteeism.<sup>26</sup>

School climate, which relates to the overall friendliness, respect and trust imbued within a school community, is another dimension that restorative justice strengthens, according to research. Even though evidence is scant, a 2013 study did note a rise in "school connectedness and improved problem-solving among students in a six-week follow-up" of a restorative justice school program in Minnesota. In addition, most of the school staff thought the program aided students' socio-emotional skills and 70 percent of them noted the program bolstered school climate.<sup>27</sup> A February 2017 NYSSBA survey of superintendents shows that 54 percent of respondents noticed a more positive school climate upon implementation of restorative justice practices.

Evidence regarding academic gains for students in schools with restorative justice programs is less clear. According to a review of studies on the topic, "there is limited and mixed evidence that RJ has had an impact on achievement and academic progress."<sup>28</sup>



<sup>24</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid: p.22.

# IV. Implementing Restorative Justice

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## Obstacles to Restorative Justice in Schools

Implementation of restorative justice in schools can come with some challenges. The top three obstacles to restorative justice implementation are: “training needs,” “lack of buy-in by staff,” and “insufficient funding,” according to a recent study of restorative justice practitioners in schools.<sup>29</sup> The perspectives of New York State school superintendents mirror the research data. Out of those superintendents who responded to a question about what challenges restorative justice poses in their districts, 47 percent cited buy-in from staff, an answer that superseded other possible challenges like insufficient professional development (34 percent) and lack of funding (37 percent).

Best training practices, the practitioners note, are those that are consistent and provide time for contemplation and application. A one-day training workshop is not enough. If schools can’t commit to periodic trainings, then, according to these practitioners, it’s important to have a designated restorative justice coordinator on staff.<sup>30</sup>

Buy-in is also crucial for effective implementation, but buy-in is an uphill battle because it “involves time, training, and support for staff” which is not easy.<sup>31</sup> The “cultural shift” from more traditional exclusionary discipline to restorative justice affects “teacher buy-in” because educators can readily view restorative justice practices as too easygoing on students, and, therefore, become disengaged in the process. Like practitioners,

## Discipline Referrals for Ithaca City School District

All Schools (PreK-12)							
Discipline Referrals							
	All Students	White	African American	Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Economically Disadvantaged	SPED
2010-2011	7573	3709	2518	271	904	4676	2511
2011-2012	4857	2327	1681	138	476	3278	1612
2012-2013	4509	2223	1409	113	522	3299	1611
2013-2014	3158	1503	1022	66	281	2348	1096
2014-2015	2838	1497	812	62	204	2199	824
2015-2016	2752	1377	843	25	173	2235	950
% Change over 6 Years	-64%	-63%	-66%	91%	-91%	-82%	-62%

\*64% Reduction in Discipline Referrals Over 6 Years

Ithaca City School District, a district that implements restorative justice, experienced a major drop in discipline referrals from 2010-11 to 2015-16.

<sup>29</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Practitioners’ Perspectives. January 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RWJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8\\_20160120PC.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RWJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8_20160120PC.pdf): p.20

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p.20



teachers note that “buy-in could be impacted by a Restorative Justice Coordinator if this individual had the community organizing skills to develop relationships with teachers, students, and parents and learn how to best fit the model to their needs.”<sup>32</sup> And, this could also aid communication between teachers and school administrators to ensure “consistent messag[ing]” from school administrators about restorative justice implementation.<sup>33</sup> Research backs the notion of an uphill battle when it comes to changing perceptions about discipline as some scholars think “a shift in attitudes

toward punishment” may not happen for up to three years, while “the deep shift to a restorative-oriented school climate might take up to three to five years.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition, funding is also a concern because it is needed not only for initial training, but for continued training and support for educators.<sup>35</sup>

Another possible obstacle, notes the research, is lack of support from teachers unions because restorative justice gives teachers more work.<sup>36</sup> New York State United Teachers’ position on restorative justice, though,

*Discipline Referrals for Ithaca City High School*

	All Students	White	African American	Asian	Hispanic or Latino	Economically Disadvantaged	SPED
2010-2011	5952	2870	1978	253	773	3469	1813
2011-2012	3165	1376	1178	112	398	2016	936
2012-2013	2751	1294	825	95	424	1887	896
2013-2014	1601	676	597	29	207	1114	532
2014-2015	1443	638	476	49	147	1049	334
2015-2016	1092	372	476	7	93	867	306
% Change over 6 Years	-82%	-87%	-76%	-97%	-88%	-75%	-83%

\*76% Reduction in Discipline Referrals Over 5 Years

Ithaca City High School shows an 82 percent drop in discipline referrals from 2010-11 and 2015-16.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, Sally. “Just Restoration vs. ‘It’s Just Policy’: What Will It Take To Truly Reform School Discipline?” *The Huffington Post*. July 29, 2013.p.3.  
<sup>33</sup> Gregory, Anne. 4 Lessons for Implementing Restorative Justice from Our Project Evaluator Anne Gregory. Brooklyn Community Foundation. <http://www.brooklyncommunityfoundation.org/blog/2016/05/4-lessons-implementing-restorative-justice-our-project-evaluator-anne-gregory>. May 9, 2016.  
<sup>34</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf). p.11.  
<sup>35</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Practitioners’ Perspectives. January 2016. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RWJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8\\_20160120PC.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RWJF-RJ-Survey-and-Practitioner-Interview-Report-V.8_20160120PC.pdf).  
<sup>36</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report>



as indicated by then President Karen Magee in an interview with NYSSBA's executive director, Timothy Kremer, is favorable toward restorative justice.<sup>37</sup> Other obstacles to effective implementation include the ability of practitioners to transition to school settings from criminal justice environments and few, if any, methodological instruments to assess progress of restorative justice in schools.<sup>38</sup> Some specialists developed their own instruments, but others indicated that the practices are "not measurable," since restorative justice is related to various qualitative-like factors including school climate, communication and relational development. Ironically, though, the specialists still understand the need for measured results.<sup>39</sup>

*Voices of Restorative Justice*

NYSSBA spoke with school superintendents (Dr. Douglas Huntley of Queensbury Union Free School District and Dr. Luvelle Brown of Ithaca City School District), higher education scholars who focus on restorative justice (Dr. Marilyn Armour of the University of Texas at Austin and Dr. Aerika Brittan Loyd of the University of Illinois at Chicago), a director of a restorative justice higher education initiative that works with K-12 school districts (Dr. David Karp of Skidmore College), and the Executive Director of the

NYS Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children (Ms. Kathleen DeCataldo, Esq.) about best practices, challenges and opportunities associated with implementing restorative justice in school districts. Some themes from these discussions include the following:

- *Buy-in Happens From The Ground Up*

Ithaca City School District started its restorative justice initiative, including teacher training, because teachers requested it, Ithaca Superintendent Brown told NYSSBA. This way, buy-in from teachers wasn't a challenge to restorative justice implementation because teachers had asked school leaders for it.



Buy-in, according to Armour, a social work faculty member at University of Texas at Austin and director of the university's Institute of Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue, is best handled by listening to teachers to understand their viewpoints about restorative justice. Resistance should be expected, she notes. Brittain Loyd, who is conducting research on restorative justice in Chicago, concurs. Restorative justice, she told NYSSBA, "doesn't work as well if the whole school doesn't have buy-in."

Buy-in from teachers, notes DeCataldo, is just as important as dedication from school leaders to implement restorative justice practices and provide the support needed to do this. To foster buy-in, DeCataldo noted that some school administrators first piloted restorative justice with teachers before rolling it out to the school community.

According to Huntley, one challenge of implementation is educating parents and teachers about restorative justice, especially that "RJ means that we no longer do things to kids," states Huntley, "we instead work with them in order to hold them accountable."

<sup>37</sup> Magee notes that restorative justice requires resources, "quality professional development" that is consistent and includes all school personnel. "The training and philosophy," notes Magee, "behind it [RJ] has to be engaged by the entire community." NYSSBA. NYSSBA News. Interview with Karen Magee. June 20, 2016. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation\\_id=annotation\\_3248784425&feature=iv&src\\_vid=jnWIEWU0ooCE&v=TEUKZdgpLI8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?annotation_id=annotation_3248784425&feature=iv&src_vid=jnWIEWU0ooCE&v=TEUKZdgpLI8).

<sup>38</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid: p.13.



• *It's About Changing Mindsets*

Restorative justice, states Huntley, “is really a mindset, a commitment to helping students in a research-based, best practices model.”

Armour agrees with Huntley. “It’s really about changing mindsets,” she told NYSSBA, and that takes time. According to her, it’s “at least a 3-5 year process” because that’s how long it takes to change norms and mindsets. Students will know RJ well by this time, she notes, and if school districts attempt to implement it in a shorter time frame, “it will go belly-up” because it involves “systems change” which, in this case, refers to “going from a punitive to a relational model” that values relationship-building and connections, which takes time.

To emphasize the “commitment” it takes to implement restorative justice effectively, DeCataldo says “it’s not a light switch that you can turn on... It takes time.” She also emphasizes that this change in mindset in school discipline reform is favorable for girls, because for girls “it is the relationship that makes a difference in whether an intervention is effective. Restorative practices do just that, build relationships.”

• *No Ad Hoc Needed*

Rather than implement restorative justice practices on an ad hoc basis, it’s important for sustainability purposes that restorative justice practices and related programs like social and emotional learning initiatives be embedded into the vision of the school district. For example, Brown describes how restorative justice complements other Ithaca City School District initiatives like meditation and yoga, culturally-responsive teaching and even participation in afterschool programs that constitute a positive school climate. The district also revamped the full policy manual and code of conduct by embedding language indicative of restorative justice throughout policies such as the athletic eligibility policy, which discusses types of behaviors expected and how students will be held accountable for these behaviors.

Karp agrees with Brown in that a whole district approach aids sustainable efforts with restorative justice. A “classic challenge,” Karp told NYSSBA, is how to incorporate restorative justice throughout the district because it is so comprehensive, but the “whole school approach” works best for success. Schools that “incorporate restorative principles and practices into the fabric of their community” have a better chance

at being sustainable. The restorative justice project he directs at Skidmore College has free resources available at [SkidmoreRJ.org](http://SkidmoreRJ.org) that can help school districts learn about restorative justice.

• *Slow and Steady Wins the Race*

According to Karp, to avoid pitfalls such as finding the time for implementation of restorative justice and providing effective training, school districts should take “a slow and methodical approach.” That approach should start with a committee that gauges interest in restorative justice, then moves to implementation that starts



Dr. Luvelle Brown, superintendent of Ithaca City School District, hugging a student.

with school staff reading books like *The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools* to build awareness of restorative justice, followed by training. Be strategic, notes Armour, who stresses that it's important not to "take on too much too fast." She advocates for beginning with a small footprint and building from there.

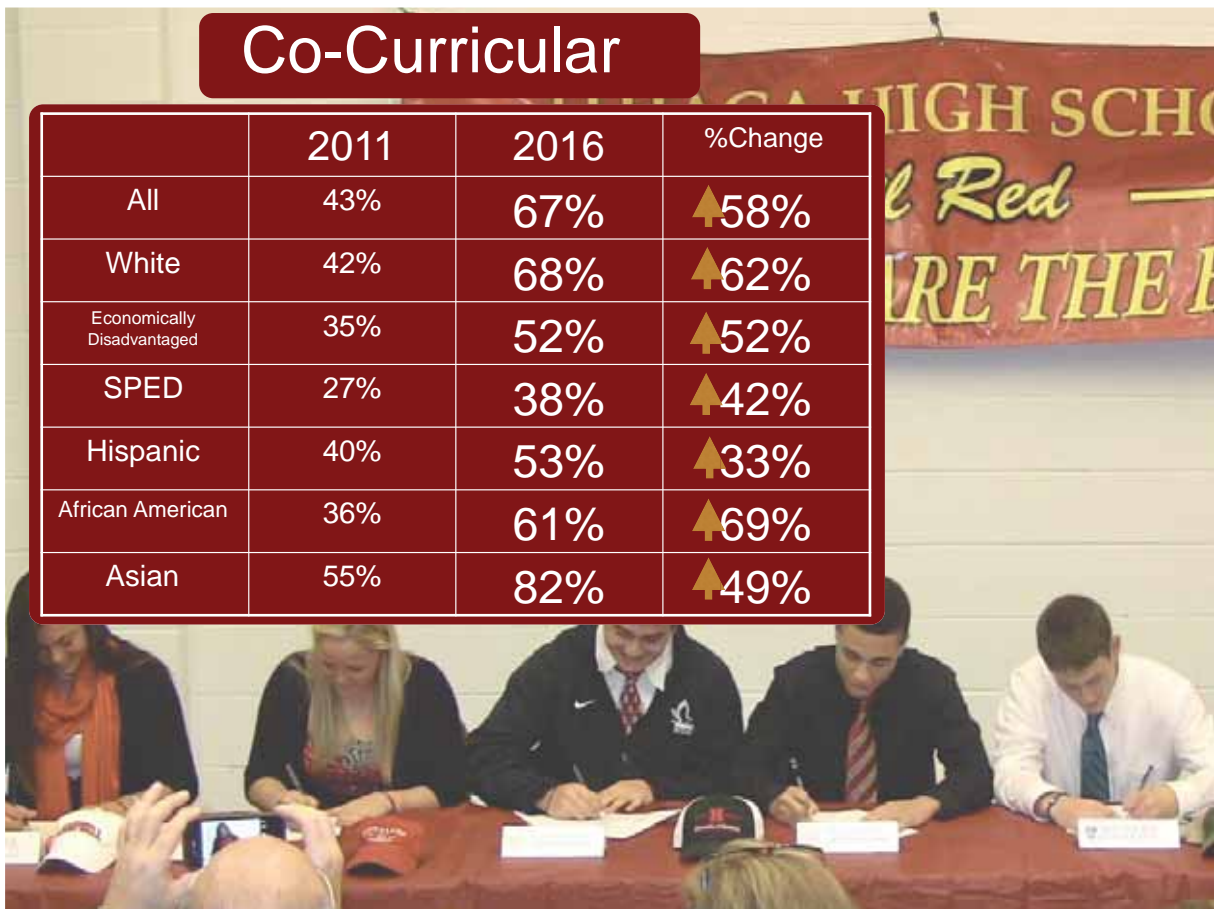
- *Consistent Training, Education, and Supports*

For restorative justice to be fully accepted and sustainable, it is important to provide school staff with regular training, offer educational outreach to

parents as needed, and support teachers by, for example, hiring restorative justice coordinators who can help scaffold and mentor teachers and facilitate restorative justice efforts.

According to Armour, restorative coordinators can offer mentoring to teachers who may not have received such training in their teacher education programs. That, in turn, may help buttress training efforts. This type of support coupled with year-round professional development is beneficial to teachers, says Armour.

*Co-curricular Participation of Ithaca City School Students*



Participation in co-curricular activities complements Dr. Brown's vision for a positive school climate including student engagement.

Educating parents and teachers about restorative justice is a challenge, Huntley told NYSSBA. Making sure they understand why “simple, quick and easy punishments” like suspensions don’t work is essential. Adults require

“strong and consistent professional development in the skills, techniques, beliefs, and practices of RJ in order to reap its benefits,” says Huntley.

*Ithaca City School District Graduation Rates*

		4-Year Graduation Rate							
		2009 Cohort as of August 2013		2010 Cohort as of October 2014		2011 Cohort as of August 2015		2012 Cohort as of August 2016	
		2009		2010		2011		2012	
All Student	354/398	89%	295/329	90%	369/393	94%	350/373	94%	
White	248/271	92%	194/212	92%	254/267	95%	244/257	95%	
African American	36/43	84%	30/36	83%	34/39	87%	30/33	91%	
Economically Disadvantaged	70/100	70%	78/92	85%	78/92	85%	120/136	88%	
SPED	31/53	59% *	19/30	63% *	19/30	63%	25/35	71%	
Asian or Pacific Islander	46/50	92%	47/51	92%	49/51	96%	35/37	95%	

\*IEP Diplomas do not count in state calculations

Ithaca City School District's 2012 graduation rates compared to 2009 graduation rates increased across all student populations.



A superintendent and student advisory council reflects the collaborative culture Dr. Brown sets forth for the district.

# V. Conclusion

## Three Best Practices

These Voices of Restorative Justice – all, in some way, scholars and/or practitioners in the field – mirror a lot of the research about best practices for restorative justice implementation in school districts and inform some primary takeaways from this report including the following:

### **Takeaway #1** *Use “A Whole-School Approach”.*

Use restorative justice as “a whole-school approach,” not just a piecemeal fix on a case-by-case disciplinary basis. [Of note, this strategy for sustainability is “grounded in contextual findings from real-world implementation,” according to research, so, while it is recommended, it “is not backed by rigorous scientific evidence.”<sup>40</sup>] If restorative justice is not employed top-down in a school district so that all staff model restorative justice strategies, some scholars think it won’t survive.<sup>41</sup> This goes beyond just including it in a school district’s code of conduct, which is essential to do.<sup>42</sup> It involves staff using restorative justice strategies with each other too.<sup>43</sup>

### **Takeaway #2** *Understand How to Change Mindsets.*

Expect resistance from teachers. Offer consistent professional development and additional staff support (i.e., restorative justice coordinators), if needed. Listen to teachers and take a bottom-up approach to change. Understand that changing norms and mindsets takes about 3-5 years.<sup>44</sup>

### **Takeaway #3** *Don’t rush it.*

There is no rush to successful implementation, so make sure it’s niched to your school district’s needs and strategized well and over time.

Restorative justice places relationships and accountability at the front and center of everyday school life and aims to allow students to mend fences with others and build bridges that offer them future potential, not future prison terms. The takeaways presented in this report allow school board members to make informed decisions about how to strategize for effective restorative justice implementation and, ultimately, more positive school climates.

<sup>40</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review. February 2016. p.12. [http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ\\_Literature-Review\\_20160217.pdf](http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf).

<sup>41</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report/>.

<sup>42</sup> National Association of State Boards of Education. Education Leaders Report, Vol. 1, No. 2: Advancing School Discipline Reform. August 2015. <http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/downloads/report/Advancing-School-Discipline-Reform-Sept-2015.pdf> ; Dignity in Schools. Examples of District Codes of Conduct. <http://www.dignityinschools.org/resources/examples-district-codes-conduct>. Retrieved February 2017

<sup>43</sup> WestEd. Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: Summary Findings from Interviews with Experts. October 2015. <https://www.wested.org/resources/restorative-justice-in-schools-report/>.

<sup>44</sup> In 2015, Tisha Edwards, the former discipline monitor for Syracuse City School District who was the chief of staff and interim CEO of Baltimore City Schools, “considered Baltimore’s shift to restorative justice a 10-year journey.” McMahon, Julie. It’s Normal to Want to Kill Each Other Now, School Discipline Expert Tells Syracuse. Syracuse Post-Standard. December 24, 2015. [http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2015/12/discipline\\_expert\\_tells\\_syracuse\\_community\\_to\\_step\\_up.html](http://www.syracuse.com/schools/index.ssf/2015/12/discipline_expert_tells_syracuse_community_to_step_up.html).



New York State  
School Boards  
Association

24 Century Hill Drive • Suite 200  
Latham, NY 12110-2125  
Tel: 518.783.0200 • 800.342.3360  
Fax: 518.783.0211  
[www.nyssba.org](http://www.nyssba.org)