

Raising the Bar: Measuring Restorative Practices

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Abstract

Schools across the nation often engage in unequal discipline practices that result in increased suspensions and expulsions for students of color. Data collection from schools by the U. S. Department of Education illustrates this problem. “Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. On average, 5% of white students are suspended, compared to 16% of Black students” (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Practices that purport to be discipline often marginalize students of color. Fortunately, however, schools across the country have begun to use Restorative Discipline Practices (RDP) as a means to change the disproportionate out-of-school and in-school suspensions of African-American students that result from inadequate and ineffective discipline practices.

Introduction

According to Bailey, in *Restorative Discipline Practices: A Journey in Implementation by A Community of Texas Educators* (Lang, Bailey, Curtis, Rico, Patton, Karydas, Martinez, Sepeda, 2016), the restorative discipline process centers around “the use of community groups, or circles, that develops the values set forth by the participants.” Building relationships, trust and respect with students can be achieved through this process. The circle becomes a safe way for participants to develop relationships to form meaningful connections. Storytelling, or providing brief autobiographical accounts, gives members equal voice and becomes the foundation by which members build community. Students begin to see that others care about their behavior and their feelings when they are asked how they feel. Teachers learn about issues affecting students outside of school and create dialogue for conflict resolution, thereby becoming partners in the student’s school experience. Not only does this contribute to changing the student’s behavior but it changes the school climate as well (Lang, Bailey, Curtis, Rico, Patton, Karydas, Martinez, Sepeda, 2016). The desired outcomes of implementing RDP are building trusting relationships, developing social and emotional intelligence, identifying potential student leaders, and developing a strong school community.

During implementation of RDP, schools across Texas observed a decrease in discipline referrals; a corresponding reduction in suspensions of African-American students was observed after RDP was implemented. Three schools that used the Fidelity Continuum Scale reported, in an interview, the following: At the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the Restorative Discipline Practices (RDP) coordinator said, “I have noticed changes among students such as less bullying, friendly conversations, respect of one another, and the ability to resolve

conflict without adult intervention.” Anahuac ISD’s Restorative Discipline Practices (RDP) coordinator reported “We have seen a drastic change in behavior from the students in the way they treat their teachers, each other, and the facility.” Athens ISD’s Restorative Discipline Coordinator stated, “Yes, we have seen a decrease in offenses on campus after implementing RDP, but the greatest decrease was in repeat offenders.”

Restorative Discipline Practices can be used in classroom instruction, social engagement, and faculty/staff meetings. Beyond discipline, RDP may improve all aspects of classroom management. It can develop effective leadership skills and promote inclusive practices for students with special needs. RDP provides an opportunity for all teachers and students to build meaningful dialogue that establishes trust. The essential component is the development of a foundation for building relationships. This foundation offers a safe place for students to have a voice in ways that connect them to their community. Additionally, RDP can improve communication and relationships with parents and community stakeholders.

Restorative Discipline Practices (RDP) are not a quick fix or a panacea for discipline problems. To embark on the restorative journey, schools ideally must commit to a three to five- year plan for implementation. Furthermore, they must commit to engaging all stakeholders in the school community, with ongoing staff training and data review support. A small pilot approach initially allows buy-in to grow naturally. It provides time for the stakeholders--faculty, staff, students, parents and community--to monitor progress on a small scale. The pilot approach allows the stakeholders to learn, increase skills development and embody the tenets of RDP with the result that everyone becomes a part of the progress. It takes time to cultivate relationships that build community within the school and with its surrounding neighborhood. By starting small, schools can build the capacity to shift the current paradigm of discipline from punitive to restorative and improve the school’s culture and climate. By taking time for implementation, achieving the goals of RDP (giving everyone a voice, creating opportunities to repair harm, and building relationships that foster a safe and secure environment for learning and living) is more likely to occur. Athens ISD’s Athens Elementary RDP coordinator offered this advice. “Do not feel you have to do everything at once. Decide first if you are going to buy in for the three to five-year process. You are setting yourself up for failure without a long-term commitment.”

As they implement RDP, schools need objective ways to assess their progress. The Restorative Discipline Practices Fidelity Continuum (FCS) is an instrument that allows schools to measure the fidelity of implementation, to measure the impact of Restorative Discipline Practices on discipline referrals, and to track and monitor RDP implementation. The tool’s purpose is to establish measures that document the progress schools are making as they implement Restorative Discipline Practices. The FCS is divided into the following four key sections: training, circles, frequency and data analysis. These specific sections are the focus of the initial training school district personnel need prior to implementation.

The Fidelity Continuum Scale requires that the Response Leadership Team (RLT) acquire training to use the instrument. The RLT are members of the campus staff such as the assistant principal, counselor, nurse, special education teacher, grade level teacher, data clerk, student, and parent. Each of the members brings his or her area of expertise or knowledge as it relates to school discipline referrals, attendance and academics. The students and parents are asked to attend the RLT meeting to obtain general data information regarding school discipline referrals, attendance, and academics. The RLT collects and analyzes school discipline data, student attendance, and academic achievement information to establish baseline data. By establishing a baseline, comparison with new data that the team collects every six weeks during the school year can be used to measure fidelity of implementation and outcomes. The team can then assess the progress of and barriers to implementation and determine appropriate next steps.

The Restorative Discipline Practices Fidelity Continuum Scale (FCS) helps schools implement RDP with fidelity and achieve desired outcomes. The FCS documents progress, evaluates process, and helps build a strong infrastructure for change in the approach to discipline in the school. Those schools in Texas that implement RDP report their data to the Texas Education Agency to showcase their efforts to actively address change and to improve their discipline practices. (See Table 1) This scale is a guide for school districts to use to determine the point of implementation of Restorative Discipline Practices (RDP) at the school district and campus levels. RDP is a PROCESS not a PROGRAM that requires a three to five-year implementation plan. The idea is to start small and then expand. This Fidelity Scale will provide a reliable and efficient measure of the extent to which school personnel are applying the key components of RDP.

Table 1

Districts	Number of referrals Pre RDP	Number of referrals Post RDP
Houston ISD Elementary School	23	5
Anahuac ISD Middle School	250	125
Athens ISD Elementary School	165	59

Because schools are places of diversity, students, staff, parents, and members of the community must work together to achieve progress in reducing inequities in disciplinary actions. Implementing Restorative Discipline Practices is a first step; evaluating this implementation is a second step. Determining the quality of implementation and the outcomes of RDP using the Fidelity Continuum Scale can change how schools view discipline. Using Restorative Discipline Practices engages the mind and heart. Discipline that takes into account the whole person and engages the entire community requires learning new strategies and processes and implementing those in ways that support students rather than using punitive consequences to change behavior. Doing so may create a more caring culture.

According to Lang, et al., in Texas, restorative discipline practices are beginning to change how we view discipline in our schools. One of the problems for improving discipline is being able to measure our progress. The FCS is a tool that not only measures the progress but it also provides documentation of the implementation process. Fidelity is key when implementing any process. As related to next steps in a school's improvement regarding its discipline policies, fidelity is especially important in successfully implementing and evaluating restorative discipline and improving a school's discipline process.

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