

[Testimonial]

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The restorative justice model that we've created is a tiered model, based on response to intervention, which is a framework that a lot of educators already understand because it's a model that people use for instruction. It's about supporting social-emotional learning of the students. When I say social-emotional skills, I'm talking about self-awareness, social awareness, self-regulation—all the skills you need to be a successful human being and have successful relationships, in and out of school.

We need restorative practices in Oakland because we need a discipline process that doesn't push kids out. Instead we say, 'we're going to keep you as part of our community, and we're going to work with you to hold you accountable and create some healing for everyone that's been affected.' It's really beautiful because students are empowered to become leaders in restorative justice.

In Oakland we've had a major issue with disproportionate discipline—*racially* disproportionate discipline. African-American students are being suspended and expelled at rates far exceeding their percentage of the population in the district. For example, 34% of our population is African-American, and they make up 64% of the suspensions. That's not true with any other race or ethnicity at our district. And really, that's a violation of their civil rights. Oakland is sending some kids to graduation, and some kids to prison, and that's just unacceptable. A major push for our district is to eliminate that racially biased discipline; restorative justice is one of the strategies we're using to do that.

How do you teach math in a way that teaches patience or empathy?
Restorative justice prompts those kinds of questions. The combination of

all our restorative efforts aims to create a positive school climate where people feel safe and cared for, where relationships are first and foremost. We want to create environments that make kids want to come to school because they feel that someone cares about them, and that when a harm or a conflict does happen, it's dealt with in a positive, restorative way that doesn't push kids out of school.

Funding is an issue—a main issue. We really need a big influx of cash to do this right. What that means is hiring people that can help schools, help move a school, transform a school. Because we're talking about transformation—really organizational transformation—and the school *is* that organization. We need the financial capacity to do this work.

For example, let's say a kid is incessantly tapping his pencil. You might ask them to stop a few times, and they might not stop, and all of a sudden it escalates, and it's seen as a sign of disrespect to the teacher. The teacher might engage in a negative way because they don't want to be disrespected in front of all these other students. But teachers need to work on responding, not reacting, and understand the trauma that's informing this behavior. When you start really talking and listening to students, before you know it, they're telling you about their father who is in prison, or some kind of traumatic thing. It's important that we as adults understand the trauma that our youth are going through, and operate with that knowledge.

A lot of schools are approaching me wanting to implement restorative justice, so I'm walking them through what kind of a commitment that is. Because it is a huge commitment, and it's not just related to discipline. In fact, most of the commitment around restorative justice is around building community, and making sure that the school and the teachers and everyone there are committed to doing this. It has come from the bottom up, and the top down, and the middle, and everywhere at once. I think at least 80% of the staff needs to be on board, and be prepared to teach restorative practices explicitly to the kids, not expect them to get it through osmosis.

Restorative justice is really part of a larger strategic vision of serving the whole child, and creating what we call “full-service community schools.” We have medical and dental facilities at our schools, so kids can get that for free. We have to understand that education has to be more than just 3 + 3, right? Kids can't learn well if they're hungry. They can't learn if their tooth hurts. So restorative justice is part of that strategy, and it really works here to empower youth.

Suspension has been far overused in our school district. It's being used as sort of a blunt weapon. Schools that have really high suspension rates are

just suspending kids over and over and over again. Even though it's been proven to be ineffective, they feel it's the only tool that they have. It seems to be an easy quick fix. These schools are operating within a deficit model and a crisis mode all the time, so sometimes they feel that suspending is the only thing they can do. In the past few years, though, expulsions have gone down. Suspensions have gone down, and so have racially disproportionate suspensions now that there's been this focus on it.

Restorative justice can happen at any age. And it can happen anywhere; it can be done at home, it can be done at school, it can obviously be done in the justice system and in community groups. And certainly elementary school is perfect. Because they're already doing circle time a lot of the time—unfortunately circle time kind of stops after elementary school. Also, elementary schools in Oakland already have access to a lot of socio-emotional curriculum that our middle and high schools don't have access to. But we do restorative justice in elementary schools here as well, and the practices are the same, only the language we use is different. It focuses students and brings them in, and it gives them the chance to speak and have them participate. Even just a check-in at the beginning of class can help. And that provides the foundation for having a larger discussion about something important.

Normally there is what I call a “champion” at a particular school—someone who understands restorative justice and wants it to happen there. Then there might be another person at that school who sees them doing it. They may have come to my district-wide training because there were interested. So there's usually one person that leads to maybe three or four people at that school and after a while, they decide they've got to talk to their principal about becoming a restorative school. At that point, I'll go talk to the principal and help them understand the commitment that it takes.

Usually we like to get about 80% of the staff to be at least open to the idea of restorative justice. And I've seen a lot of people come to leave their skepticism behind. Sometimes that “no,” comes from a place of fear or unknowing, and it can be helpful to listen to them and help them understand restorative practices better. Because really, restorative justice is just best practices, it's actually going to help them a lot in the long run.

If I can just give an example, I was at a middle school where we have a peer-based restorative justice program. I came to talk to the coordinator, and there were three groups of students in this classroom. One group was prepping for a circle with one party at a time. Another group was doing a mediation, and another group was running a circle. It was all happening in the same class at the same time, and I asked the coordinator, “so, is there ever a conflict, having three processes happening around the same time?”

She said, the only conflict is that sometimes they'll fight over the talking piece. That's it, the students respect it.

A major challenge for us is people misunderstanding what restorative justice is. A lot of people think it's being soft, or that people just do some hollow apology and they're back in the classroom. That's hardly what it is—it's the opposite of what it is. There's nothing more consequential than being accountable for what you've done and hearing from the person you've harmed. So many people would much rather be suspended or sent to jail than have to sit next to their grandmother and admit what they've done and repair that harm.

I really see restorative justice patiently persisting through time. Some people say, "Oh, restorative justice is another flavor-of-the-month-initiative type of thing," so another challenge of mine is constantly battling that perception. But restorative justice is happening in this area, in the community, in the justice system, and at the schools. It's in the zeitgeist, really. It's a philosophical foundation that we're asking people to embrace and shift towards. When that happens, it sticks.