A Restorative Approach to Resolving Conflict

Today, our schools reflect the state of the 21st century. Facing crises such as world terrorism and a collapsing international economy, many schools have adopted disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance. Research has shown that reactive approaches such as zero tolerance, including out-of-school suspension and expulsion, have limited effect and tend to hurt the student by labeling him or her; create idol time, which can create an atmosphere conducive to at-risk or illegal behaviors; and contribute to the student falling further behind academically.

Zero tolerance policies are problematic and, according to the American Bar Association’s “Final Report: Bi-Partisan Working Group on Youth Violence,” they have overshot their original purpose “as a congressional response to students with guns.” Instead, zero tolerance has “become a one-size-fits-all solution to all the problems that schools confront. It has redefined students as criminals, with unfortunate consequences.” School suspensions and expulsions result in a number of negative outcomes for both schools and students. Students see out-of-school suspension as a vacation. If they realize that nothing will be done at home, they will continue to try to get suspended.

Restorative dispute resolution (RDR) offers an alternative to suspension and expulsion by addressing the victims of misbehavior and repairing the harm caused to them and to the school community. RDR fosters a sense of community within the school and neighborhood through the development of listening, mutual respect, and fairness.

Restorative Accountability

A more useful way of dealing with conflict is the use of restorative practices, which have been used effectively for years in the juvenile justice arena. Instead of zero tolerance and authoritarian punishment, restorative practices provide high levels of control and support, which encourage appropriate behavior, and places the responsibility for resolution on students themselves.

RDR is designed to repair the harm to the victim and school, protect the school community, and build peer and intergenerational relationships through mutual respect and fairness. This is accomplished by using cognitive-behavioral processes (role-playing, discussion, feedback, demonstration, activities) among the stakeholders. They include the offending student, his or her parents or support group, the victim, his or her parents or support group, and a trained facilitator.

The group members negotiate a settlement that addresses the harm to the victim and school community, resulting in a written contract that spells out the responsibilities of each participant. The contract must also satisfy the school administration and address legal concerns. Through this process, participants learn about each other and develop empathy by exercising respect, cooperation, and understanding.

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Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the offending student to repair the harm for the incident. It requires that every effort be made to restore losses to the victim and school. Offending students can participate in community restoration projects, mentor or tutor other students, organize community activities such as clean-up projects on school grounds, or participate on advisory boards.

Parents and support groups are an important part of this process; their participation is a key to its success. They can give back to the school communities and neighborhoods by participating, providing feedback on the process, advocating for the school community, mentoring and tutoring students, and becoming facilitators and serving on advisory boards.

Successful Restorative Programs

The numbers tell a powerful story: Schools implementing restorative methods have seen a drop in disciplinary problems, decreased reliance on detention and suspension, and an improvement in student attitudes.

A pilot project was implemented at Pattengill Middle School in Lansing, Michigan, in January 2005 to manage disciplinary issues through restorative practices. As a result:

- There was a 15 percent drop in suspensions, while suspension rates at the district’s other middle schools increased;
- Two expulsions were averted;
- Conflicts were resolved effectively, with 93 percent of participating students reporting that they used restorative methods to resolve their conflicts; and
- Nearly 90 percent of participating students reported learning new skills in their restorative experiences, and 86 percent reported using those skills to peacefully resolve or avert conflicts after their restorative interventions.

The program’s success led the district to expand its restorative program
to one elementary school, two more middle schools and a high school for 2006-2007. Abby J. Porter reports in “Restoration Practices in Schools: Research Reveals Power of Restorative Approach, Part II” that the district’s restorative justice coordinator estimated that during that year, restorative interventions saved students nearly 1,500 days of suspension.

Public schools in Minnesota are also implementing a range of restorative practices. From 1998 to 2001, the Minnesota Department of Education conducted an evaluation of restorative practices in primary and secondary schools in four districts. The study showed a 30 percent to 50 percent reduction in suspensions. According to Restorative Practices in Minnesota Schools, a video interview produced by the International Institute for Restorative Practices, Nancy Riestenberg of the Minnesota Department of Education indicates that one elementary school reduced its behavior referrals for inappropriate physical contact from seven per day to a little more than one per day.

**Restore the Student and the Community**

A unique feature of the restorative model is making clear to the offending student that he or she has not only violated the victim, but has also victimized the school community. Thus, RDR allows students to not only make the victim “whole,” but to make amends to the school as well. RDR establishes meaningful peer and intergenerational relationships by establishing a culture of listening and mutual respect. Giving back—in restorative terms—involves the stakeholders: offending students, victims, parents, and school. All stakeholders participate in the process, addressing the harm that has been caused in ways meaningful to the victim and the school community.

Jay Zaslaw is the sole proprietor of Victory Services, a consulting, training and grant writing service in Navarre, Florida. His e-mail address is czc2@mchsi.com.