



How Restorative Approaches to Student Discipline Can Help Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline

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The “school-to-prison pipeline” is the term commonly used to describe the flow of U.S. students from schools into the justice system — an inflow that has increased in recent decades because of the use of zero-tolerance disciplinary measures in schools across the nation. Zero-tolerance policies emphasize strict responses to student infractions and, in some cases, lead to students being removed from school and referred to juvenile justice systems. When that happens, students become much more likely to drop out of school.

Harmful Effects of Zero-Tolerance Discipline

Although it remains unclear whether zero-tolerance policies are effective at deterring misbehavior, they do have a profound influence on whether students remain in school. Zero-tolerance measures may make schools less safe even as they hurt adolescent wellbeing by worsening academic performance and jeopardizing student graduation. In turn, such poor results at school can lead to later detention or incarceration, fueling the school-to-prison pipeline.

Studies show disproportionate harmful effects on low-income and racial and ethnic minority students and on those enrolled in special education. In one large urban school district, zero-tolerance policies increased expulsion rates for white students from 0.03 percent to 0.05 percent, while expulsions went from affecting 2.2 percent to 4.4 percent of black students. Such racial disparities in school disciplinary actions exacerbate differences in school performance, increasing overall racial gaps in academic achievement.

How Restorative Practices Can Transform Schools

Schools must establish effective disciplinary policies, because an insecure or violent school — marred by bullying, physical assault, or robbery — can jeopardize student learning and success. However, zero-tolerance policies that are overly punitive are not the best approach. As a promising alternative, restorative approaches — if properly implemented and evaluated — can facilitate learning and allow opportunities for healing for the persons involved in infractions. These measures can foster a climate of belonging and security for all, and keep students in the classroom to enhance educational progress.

Adapted from criminal justice settings, restorative approaches to school discipline emphasize that violations of rules harm people and relationships. A restorative response to an infraction seeks to understand the perspectives of the people involved, in order to address the effects of the offense and remedy damage done to others.

Consider the example of an elementary school student who has been a “problem” for the entire semester. His teacher reports that he has frequently disrupted the classroom, stolen items from her desk, burst out of the class to roam the halls, and bullied other students during class. She has tried different disciplinary strategies, including removing him from the classroom, an approach that deprives him of valuable academic time and labels him a nuisance. The student does not understand how his behavior affects the classroom; and the exhausted teacher thinks that her only option is to write a referral — a statement asserting that the juvenile should be under the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court.

However, this school has a restorative practice coordinator that support students, teachers, ancillary staff, and administrators. The coordinator meets with the teacher and listens to her concerns to develop a clear sense of what is going on in the classroom. In part, the meeting is an opportunity for the teacher to vent. Although the

teacher initially wanted the student removed from her class, she agrees to a restorative mediation in which the coordinator will help her gain a better understanding of what the student is communicating with his difficult behavior.

In school settings, restorative justice approaches are implemented in two tiers. In the first proactive tier, members of the school community engage in programs to foster community, facilitate leadership, and establish relationships based on trust, understanding, and shared values. Programming uses language to foster emotional connections and reduce adversarial feelings between students and authority figures. In the second tier, the school addresses harmful episodes — such as talking back, bullying, or name calling. Aggrieved students or teachers address the harm done to them directly with whoever caused the harm. Where typical schools might remove or restrict students who caused harm and keep victims at arms' length from the punishment process, restorative practices require that all parties are present and participate in relationship building and restitution. Although more research needs to be done on such mediations, they may represent a promising alternative for school administrators who want to address behavioral problems without relegating troublesome students to the juvenile justice system, from which many will not escape.

Implementation and Assessment Needs

Implementing restorative practices in any school requires a specifically tailored plan. Teachers must be consulted and their specific concerns must be taken into account. School administrators and restorative practice coordinators who manage these programs must establish a clear sense of what is going on in each classroom where problems occur; and they must routinely follow up, and work to improve schoolwide dynamics that influence the classroom. Successful restorative practices focus on improving damaged relationships to build a healthier school environment.

Restorative experiments are well worth the effort, however, because schools — and vulnerable students — desperately need alternatives to zero-tolerance discipline. Without a change, the school-to-prison pipeline will expand, exacerbating racial inequalities and damaging individual lives, communities, and the fabric of American democracy. As experiments with restorative practices proceed, research must be done to find specific program features that effectively reduce expulsions, suspensions, and referrals to juvenile justice system. Grantmakers, researchers, and school administrators must cooperate to closely examine restorative school practices. With this research in hand, policymakers will then be better prepared to implement alternatives to zero-tolerance that can ensure school safety and further equal opportunity for all.