



Reimagining School Discipline through Restorative Justice

Da'Shay Templeton, California Lutheran University

When 14-year-old Jamal was caught in a hallway scuffle at his Oakland middle school, the outcome initially seemed predictable. Under traditional zero-tolerance policies, Jamal, who was involved but hadn't initiated the conflict, would have faced suspension, jeopardizing his academic progress and deepening his distrust in school authorities. Instead, his school had implemented restorative justice practices. Rather than immediate punishment, Jamal and the other students involved participated in a restorative circle facilitated by a counselor, where they openly discussed the causes of the conflict and its impacts on their peers and teachers. Through this structured dialogue, Jamal not only recognized the harm caused, but also repaired relationships, learned critical social-emotional skills, and ultimately remained engaged in his school community. Jamal's story highlights the transformative potential of restorative justice (RJ)—an alternative that prioritizes accountability, healing, and community-building, starkly contrasting the damaging effects of punitive, zero-tolerance disciplinary approaches.

Restorative justice (RJ) and restorative practices (RP) provide trauma-informed, community-centered approaches to discipline, emphasizing accountability, relationship-building, and inclusion, contrasting with punitive, "zero-tolerance" policies. Zero-tolerance policies mandate severe, predetermined punishments such as suspensions or expulsions for specific infractions, regardless of context or severity, often disproportionately impacting marginalized students, increasing dropout rates, and perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline. Rooted in Indigenous traditions and criminal justice frameworks, RJ in schools utilizes strategies like restorative circles, mediation, and peer dialogue, involving students, educators, and communities in resolving conflicts and addressing harm. Evidence underscores the potential of RJ to enhance school climate, equity, student engagement, and reduce exclusionary discipline practices, though implementation challenges must be addressed.

Benefits of Restorative Justice

- **Reduction in Aggressive Behavior and Bullying:** RJ schools consistently report **decreased incidents of violence**, aggression, and bullying compared to schools using zero-tolerance policies. When implemented in the **Oakland Unified School District**, 88 percent of teachers reported that restorative practices are very or somewhat helpful in managing student behavior in the classroom.
- **Lower Suspension Rates and Discipline Disparities:** Comprehensive RJ programs **significantly reduce suspensions** and expulsions, addressing racial disparities effectively. After implementing restorative justice programs in their middle and high schools, Chicago Public Schools saw a **35 percent reduction of student arrests in school**. These RJ programs also decreased out-of-school suspensions by 18 percent.
- **Improved Attendance and Academic Outcomes:** Schools employing RJ practices have **shown notable improvements in student attendance** and academic achievement, including increased GPAs.
- **Enhanced Mental Health and School Climate:** RJ fosters **emotional well-being**, improves social-emotional competencies, and contributes positively to overall school climate.

- **Disruption of the School-to-Prison Pipeline:** Programs like the [Clayton County Model](#), which involves community stakeholders collaborating to create a protocol to address school-based issues. This approach demonstrates RJ's capacity to significantly reduce juvenile justice referrals and improve graduation rates.

Challenges and Limitations

- **Resource-Intensive Implementation:** [Effective RJ](#) requires significant resources, extensive staff training, and sustained community involvement. Superficial adoption without adequate support diminishes effectiveness.
- **Safety Concerns:** Critics express concerns that RJ approaches [may inadequately address severe behavior](#), potentially affecting perceived school safety.
- **Unequal Implementation Across Age Groups:** RJ approaches can [vary significantly](#) in effectiveness across different age groups, particularly less consistent among adolescents compared to younger students.

Policy Recommendations

To ensure an equitable approach to discipline within schools, district leaders must establish clear guidelines for educators and staff to implement restorative justice practices for all students.

1. **Whole-School Implementation:** Integrate RJ throughout all school levels to ensure a consistent schoolwide culture of accountability and care. For example, Fremont High School in Oakland, California, utilizes a whole-school approach which includes a [12-week restorative justice class for 9th graders](#) to introduce students to RJ philosophy and practices. Similarly, Denver Public Schools have adopted district-wide restorative approaches to create cohesive school climates ([Denver RJ Implementation](#)).
2. **Sustained Professional Development:** Mandate comprehensive RJ training and ongoing professional support for educators and staff. For instance, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) offers extensive [training workshops and ongoing professional support](#) to help educators embed restorative justice effectively into their daily practices.
3. **Evaluation and Data Monitoring:** Regularly collect and analyze data on RJ outcomes, attendance, disciplinary incidents, and equity metrics to inform improvements. Pittsburgh Public Schools systematically evaluate and publish [annual reports](#) tracking discipline data, attendance, and equity outcomes from their restorative justice initiatives to continuously refine their approach.
4. **Clear Safety and Discipline Policies:** Establish guidelines delineating when traditional disciplinary actions should be used alongside RJ practices. Chicago Public Schools clearly outline their [disciplinary policies and safety guidelines](#) delineating scenarios for restorative and traditional discipline measures, ensuring clarity and consistency across all schools.
5. **Community and Family Engagement:** Foster strong school-community partnerships to support RJ implementation and sustainability. Parents and local leaders must be involved from the start to ensure cultural relevance and build trust in RJ processes. For example, the Clayton County Model in Georgia incorporates [community stakeholders, families, and local law enforcement](#) into collaborative agreements, significantly reducing juvenile justice referrals and improving community trust.
6. **Focus on Equity:** Explicitly target disciplinary equity in RJ programs, particularly supporting historically marginalized student populations. Minneapolis Public Schools' restorative justice initiative explicitly focuses on reducing disparities by providing culturally responsive resources and specialized training to

ensure equitable disciplinary practices.

7. **Age-Appropriate Practices:** Customize RJ practices to the developmental needs of different student age groups. Baltimore City Public Schools offer age-appropriate restorative practices tailored specifically for elementary, middle, and high school students, ensuring that interventions are developmentally appropriate and effective across diverse student populations.

Restorative justice presents a promising, equitable alternative to traditional disciplinary practices, improving school environments and student outcomes. Effective policy implementation requires dedicated resources, comprehensive training, robust evaluation mechanisms, clear safety guidelines, and meaningful community engagement. Given the persistent harms associated with exclusionary discipline and zero-tolerance policies, it is imperative for policymakers and educators to urgently prioritize restorative justice practices to foster safer, healthier, and more inclusive school communities.