

the Sillerman Center

FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PHILANTHROPY

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS: A Guide to High Impact Investments



Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, growing numbers of educators in primary and secondary schools adopted “zero-tolerance” disciplinary policies and practices that resulted in an increasing number of student suspensions or expulsions for minor behavioral infractions. Research shows that these practices did not improve student behavior, did not make schools safer, and did not improve academic achievement.

However, zero-tolerance policies did deprive students of crucial learning time, increased unsupervised out-of-school time, and are associated with higher drop out rates, arrest, and incarceration. These harsh disciplinary policies and practices disproportionately affect students of color, particularly Black students, though advocates remain concerned about the effects of zero tolerance policies on Latino students.

- Black students are 16% of the student population, but 32-42% of students suspended or expelled. Black females are suspended at 6 times the rate of their white peers, while Black males are suspended at 3 times the rate of their white peers.
- Black students are more likely to receive harsher discipline for the same offense compared to their White counterparts
- Under “zero tolerance” policies, the vast majority of suspensions of Black students are for minor or subjective reasons, such as “defiance,” truancy, or tardiness.
- School suspension is the #1 predictor of contact with the juvenile justice system for students who were incarcerated by 9th grade

These stark statistics support the connection between zero tolerance policies and a school-to-prison pipeline that funnels students, particularly Black students, into a dead-end criminal justice system.



A Promising Alternative: Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is an alternative to zero-tolerance. With a philosophy of reparation, accountability, discipline, and reconciliation, the goal is to identify the root causes of the disciplinary problems and build community to support and repair harm, rather than punish.

For more information on Restorative Justice, please see:

The U.S. Department of Education’s [Data Snapshot on School Discipline, Keeping Kids in School](#) by Thalia Gonzalez, the [ACLU fact sheet](#) on the School to Prison Pipeline, NCLR’s [Zero Tolerance for Latino Youth](#) factsheet, NEPC’s [Good Discipline for Education Reform, Suspension and Expulsion of Black Students from the Public Schools](#) by Mark G. Yudof, [The Discipline Gap and African Americans](#) by Anne Gregory and Rhona S. Weinstein, [High-poverty secondary schools and the juvenile justice system](#), and [Dignity, Disparity, and Desistance](#) by Mara Schiff.

High Performing Restorative Justice Programs Should:

- BUILD supportive, as opposed to adversarial, relationships between students, teachers, school administrators, parents, law enforcement, and other people who live and work in the school neighborhood
- GIVE VOICE to the person harmed
- ENGAGE in collaborative problem-solving, MAKING TIME to acknowledge and resolve conflict
- ENHANCE personal responsibility and EMPOWER change and growth in the young person who caused the harm
- ARTICULATE that harm is done against people, rather than against rules and laws
- INCLUDE strategic plans for restoration/reparation

The Institute for Restorative Justice Initiatives offers a three-tiered approach to building a culture of restorative justice. This diagram is a guide to the best practices of restorative justice in a school setting.



Graphic adapted from the Institute for Restorative Justice Initiatives

RATIONALE FOR INVESTMENT

Evidence demonstrates that zero tolerance policies are ineffective. Restorative justice is relatively new in school settings, but so far, the research on the practice suggests that these practices help reduce suspensions and contribute to students' improved educational performance. Denver's public schools provide a [model](#) for reference.

A [study of restorative justice](#) in the Oakland Unified School District in California found:

- The number of Black students suspended for "defiance" decreased by 40% in one year; suspensions for "disruption/willful defiance" decreased by 37%
- Students were able to repair harm in 76% of instances; 63% of staff reported that students are better able to resolve conflicts
- 88% of teachers reported that they are better able to manage difficult student behaviors in the classroom; 47% reported that they have reduced office referrals
- Chronic absenteeism declined by 24% and high school dropout rates declined by 56%
- Reading scores increased by 128% and graduation rates increased by 60%

Funders who invest in restorative justice programs provide short- and long-term benefits for young people by supporting them on a path through school and onto higher education and work pursuits. Given the links between school exclusion and later involvement with the criminal justice system, restorative justice could increase overall community well-being, as young people graduate and thrive.

For more information please visit:

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