

Empathy, Equity, Empowerment: Using Restorative Practices to Build Character and Community While Reducing Suspensions

by Christopher Martin

A middle school science teacher in Denver, Colorado, finds success using restorative approaches that focus on empathy rather than punitive zero-tolerance school discipline policies.

I began my career as a science teacher at a public charter school. We were small in size, and the staff were all very new to the profession. The school was built around a model of behavior management that was punitive. Staff would enter merits and demerits in a computer system that tracked and communicated this information to administration, students, and families. Students performing within the expected performance band were celebrated and those dropping below a certain status were eventually suspended or expelled from the building. For some students this system was effective, but the students who struggled to meet expectations were rarely able to catch up, and most ended up being pushed out of the school.

As a new teacher, this system seemed logical and was very similar to what I experienced as a student in my own childhood. Many students willingly complied with the system, but those who did not were never really supported or helped to work through whatever was the underlying impediment to their success. Those who struggled with academics or behavior were viewed negatively and whisked away. The “problem” was the family’s – or the next school’s – to resolve.

Reflecting on my first school’s discipline policy, I realized that the school was actually operating out of fear and compliance rather than trust, positive relationships, or a sense of community. Luckily, my experience in this building was short. I don’t necessarily blame the staff or administration, as they may have simply been operating within a system that was familiar or that had functioned well in other contexts. Nevertheless, an opportunity to more equitably serve and support the students and greater community was missed.

Fast-forward a few years, and I found myself working for Denver Public Schools at Skinner Middle School. Located in North Denver, we are a traditional Title 1 middle school; about 70 percent of our children are a racial minority (primarily Hispanic). Our leadership and community have worked tirelessly to make Skinner a place our neighborhood is willing to send their kids. We pride ourselves in serving all of our students’ needs by offering art, drama, music, sports, language, and student leadership opportunities, among a host of other ways to connect with the world.

For a number of years before I arrived, Skinner not only struggled to attract and keep a student body, but also was not able to engage our community or grow its students academically. As recently as the early 2000s, we had to plead with families to send their students to us. Instead, families bussed their students across town to schools with better records and reputations. All this has changed, and Skinner is on a continued upward trajectory to move from good to great.

We acknowledge that one of the greatest agents of change in our new positive perception and status in the community has been the caliber of citizen produced by Skinner Middle School. This is in no small way due to our use of restorative approaches, which focus on building, maintaining, and repairing relationships among all members of a school community. Data from 2007 to 2014 show that while enrollment nearly doubled from 300 to 600 students, incidents of out-of-school suspension were cut from just under 300 to approximately 50 per year.

During my first year in the district, I was honestly a bit overwhelmed with new content and found myself back in survival mode. While the school's policy was to use restorative approaches to discipline, I personally wasn't someone who was using the method with fidelity in my own teaching. Admittedly, I was barely aware of it. I thought of it as an isolated technique that the restorative practices coordinator used when students were sent to the discipline office. The times when I did attempt restorative approaches, I held on to my anger and frustration about what had happened in the situation, and this prevented me from sincerely facilitating or participating in a restorative conversation. Seeing students come back to class and make the same behavior choices after a restorative conversation did not help to convince me of the effectiveness of restorative approaches.

Throughout this first year at Skinner, I would send students to the discipline office and check in on them. Witnessing the deep processing through which our restorative practices coordinator guided students was impressive, but I still found myself asking why restorative approaches weren't working for me. Also, why did the process not seem to have an immediate effect on altering behavior for the positive? I was still skeptical of restorative approaches, but it would soon all come together and start to make sense.

The policy, systems, structures, rituals, and routines at Skinner Middle School are all very intentional and informed through data work, feedback from our community, and our school's annual needs assessment. At the end of each year, our staff complete a thorough and pointed questionnaire meant to inform everything we do around our systems and policy. Empowered with this data and feedback, each summer our prevention and intervention work-group meets for a potluck nearly every week to discuss which of our policies and systems work and which ones need to be refined.

In the summer before my second year at Skinner, I joined this work group, and that's when I really began to understand how and why restorative approaches work and just how much it has helped us turn the school around. By having an opportunity to pause over the summer and think about my practice and the restorative approaches philosophy, I began to understand what I was hoping to get out of students. It was clear that I wanted students' behavior to fall within a continuum of appropriate behavior, but did I want them to perform out of fear or because they truly care about each other? Did I want our future generations to live their lives in fear of breaking laws, or to be empowered with the knowledge, empathy, and awareness that are necessary to be strong enough to make the right choices, no matter who is watching? Restorative approaches were the means to achieving this empathy and empowerment, and I became fully invested in using them for the following school year.

Before launching into how restorative approaches function in our building, it is best to provide some context. The restorative approach isn't just a thing that we do; instead, it is a whole mindset and systematic way of approaching conflict resolution. Empathy is the basis of how we interact with each other; and it seeps into everything we do at Skinner Middle School.

Skinner is proud to share that we have gained positive attention for our implementation of restorative approaches. Families take notice and comment on the new abilities their students have to act with empathy. Beyond our community, we have also received accolades at the district level for our use of restorative approaches. We were identified by Denver Public Schools as a model for other schools to reference for best practices. Padres y Jóvenes Unidos and the National Education Association are even using us as a case study to further understand our effectiveness.

All of our staff have been trained to use restorative approaches independently in our classrooms and throughout the building. The fidelity of this process is reinforced through role-play activities and the use of our prevention and intervention manual, which is the product of our summer meeting sessions used to refine and then define everything we do at Skinner. It covers everything from how students enter the building and dress code questions to how teachers will approach a restorative conversation.

When we encounter incidents of behavior in need of redirection, we first seek to warmly redirect. If behaviors continue or are at the point of needing a pause or removal from the classroom, students are asked to take a break and complete a refocus form. We use a buddy teacher's classroom as a place to provide a temporary break from the environment and invite an opportunity to reflect. The form consists of a series of five questions designed to help students use empathy, think about what happened, and take responsibility for making things right:

What happened?

Who was affected?

What are you able to take responsibility for?

What could you have done differently in this situation?

What are you willing to do to make things right?

Before returning to class, the buddy teacher or original teacher has a quick processing conversation to assess the student's readiness to return to class. If the quality of their thinking demonstrates a thorough, empathetic reflection, they are ready to rejoin the learning environment. Start to finish the refocus should take less than ten minutes and reinforces Skinner's mission of accountability to empathy.

What the refocus process does not guarantee is that mistakes in behavior choices will never happen again. Research shows that adolescent brains are easily susceptible to peer influence, and they may also be battling years of conditioned behavior or be triggered by traumatic life experiences. What the refocus can guarantee is that the student has kept their dignity, he or she has been held accountable for their actions, and that both the student and the teacher now have an understanding of how this behavior can be avoided in the future by different action steps. Since the student has kept his or her dignity throughout, the incident is no longer a power struggle between teacher and student. It is about equity for everyone. Each refocus offers an opportunity for the student and teacher to, at minimum, maintain their relationship and oftentimes enhance it by coming together in sharing perspective.

At first glance, the refocus might not seem impactful. However, when you understand that its strength comes from the consistency of school-wide implementation, it starts to make sense. Layer the refocus with additional support and reinforcement from our restorative practices coordinator, dean of students, and dean of culture, and you begin to understand that this is a multi-tiered system of support. These staff support students through empathetic thinking when they experience escalated conflict. Peer-to-peer conflict, peer-to-staff conflict, student-to-family conflict – all of these situations are addressed with restorative practices. Even the most severe behavior incidents require a restorative conversation, and this shows our students that empathy and understanding the impact of one's actions is something that defines Skinner Middle School.

In addition, as part of our intentionality we embed events and activities throughout our year that require students to grow their skill levels in awareness and empathy. Examples include our Skinner Cares Day and the RESPECT program. Skinner Cares Day pauses academic instruction for an entire day in order to focus ourselves inward. Differentiated at the grade level, staff facilitate activities and scaffolded conversations on topics like bullying, race, and sexuality with the goal of developing deeper empathy and respect for one another. RESPECT also pauses instruction as a small-group, week-long class that heightens awareness in social situations and provides skills for students to safely and expertly navigate future challenging interpersonal situations.

Most recently, our staff had the pleasure of continuing to learn how to better serve our students by participating in a Trauma Informed Systems of Care session. Hosted in our own building, a regional expert helped staff understand that much of what we identify as undesirable student behavior is actually a triggered response caused by trauma in their lives. Trauma can

include food or housing insecurity, language or cultural barriers, abuse, neglect, and bullying. Knowing what might trigger a response from any one person is impossible. But what we learned from this training was that the triggered responses can be mediated using strong interpersonal relationships. Strong interpersonal relationships are created and maintained through empathy, which reinforces just how important our intentional culture of restorative approaches is to our successes at Skinner Middle School.

I am unendingly grateful for a fresh start, a new perspective, and a new approach to developing student conduct. My current building leaders and peers have been instrumental in helping me make a transformation from someone who uses fear and compliance as a management strategy to someone who uses compassion and empathy to mold and model citizenship in our student body.

As the age of zero-tolerance school discipline policies comes to an end, punitive punishment and suspension have been deemed ineffective. Behaviors don't change without support. Removing students from opportunities to learn without taking time to repair the hurt promotes isolation. This can lead to the withdrawal and disenfranchisement in our school system of those we are supposed to serve: students and families. Worse still, as students get caught in the punitive discipline cycle, negative perceptions of education are developed. As students spend time out of class, we further the achievement gap between the haves and have-nots.

At Skinner, we are continuing to grow in how we learn to use restorative approaches, which are not designed to be a quick fix. Undesired behaviors in the school setting are conditioned and reinforced over years from students' previous experiences at school and interactions with family and peers or from values in our society. To build trust and relationships and to learn new behaviors takes time and practice. My school's success with restorative approaches stems from investment and support from staff in the process and the fidelity of our implementation. This approach can be highly effective in supporting and empowering students, and staff, to act with intention and empathy, and our school is a model of what this can look like.

For more on Skinner Middle School's restorative approaches, see <http://skinner.dpsk12.org/restorative-approaches/>.

From: VUE Magazine, Issue 42, published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, November, 2015

<http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42/empathy-equity-empowerment-using-restorative-practices-build-character-and-community-while>



Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY