

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PLANNING

FOR SCHOOL YEAR 2022-23





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— SCHOOL LEADERS TOOLKIT —

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DC schools can **integrate restorative justice philosophy and practices** into DC schools, agencies, and communities to create more inclusive and restorative environments for all youth.

As our DC community recovers from the momentous challenges caused by the pandemic's disruption of in-person school and the personal toll it has taken on our students, staff, and families, it is more important than ever that our schools are welcoming and supportive and offer a safe and productive learning environment for all. We know that over the past two years, students have faced **increased social isolation, anxiety, depression, and violence** in their communities, making it even more critical that schools are prepared to meet the needs of all students equitably and inclusively.

This toolkit is designed for school leaders who are thinking ahead to the 2022-23 school year and interested in learning more about how they might incorporate restorative practices as they continue to work to rebuild school communities and relationships. The challenges of the pandemic will reverberate for years to come and recovery has just begun. This summer offers an opportunity for school leaders to step back and consider what staff and students really need and design a plan to help rebuild and reimagine what school looks like.

School leaders will need to attend to and balance a number of goals and objectives, including:

- Academic recovery and acceleration
- Prioritization of student mental health and increased focus on social-emotional learning
- Integration of trauma-informed supports
- Re-establishment of school norms and routines with an eye towards equity
- Improved family engagement

Restorative justice can support and be integrated with these important goals to help set the foundation of trust, understanding, and collaboration that is key to a healthy school culture that works for all students.

What is restorative justice?

Restorative justice has its roots in indigenous approaches to living in relationship with others, including traditions of storytelling in circles and reintegration of those who have harmed others within the community.¹ While it is often thought of as a preventative and responsive approach to discipline, focused on building and repairing relationships, it is more than a response to misbehavior. The fundamental goal of restorative justice is to create an inclusive learning environment and positive school culture that supports and engages all members of a school community.

THE LATEST RESEARCH ON RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FINDS IT IS EFFECTIVE IN DECREASING EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE AND HARMFUL BEHAVIORS, WHILE IMPROVING:

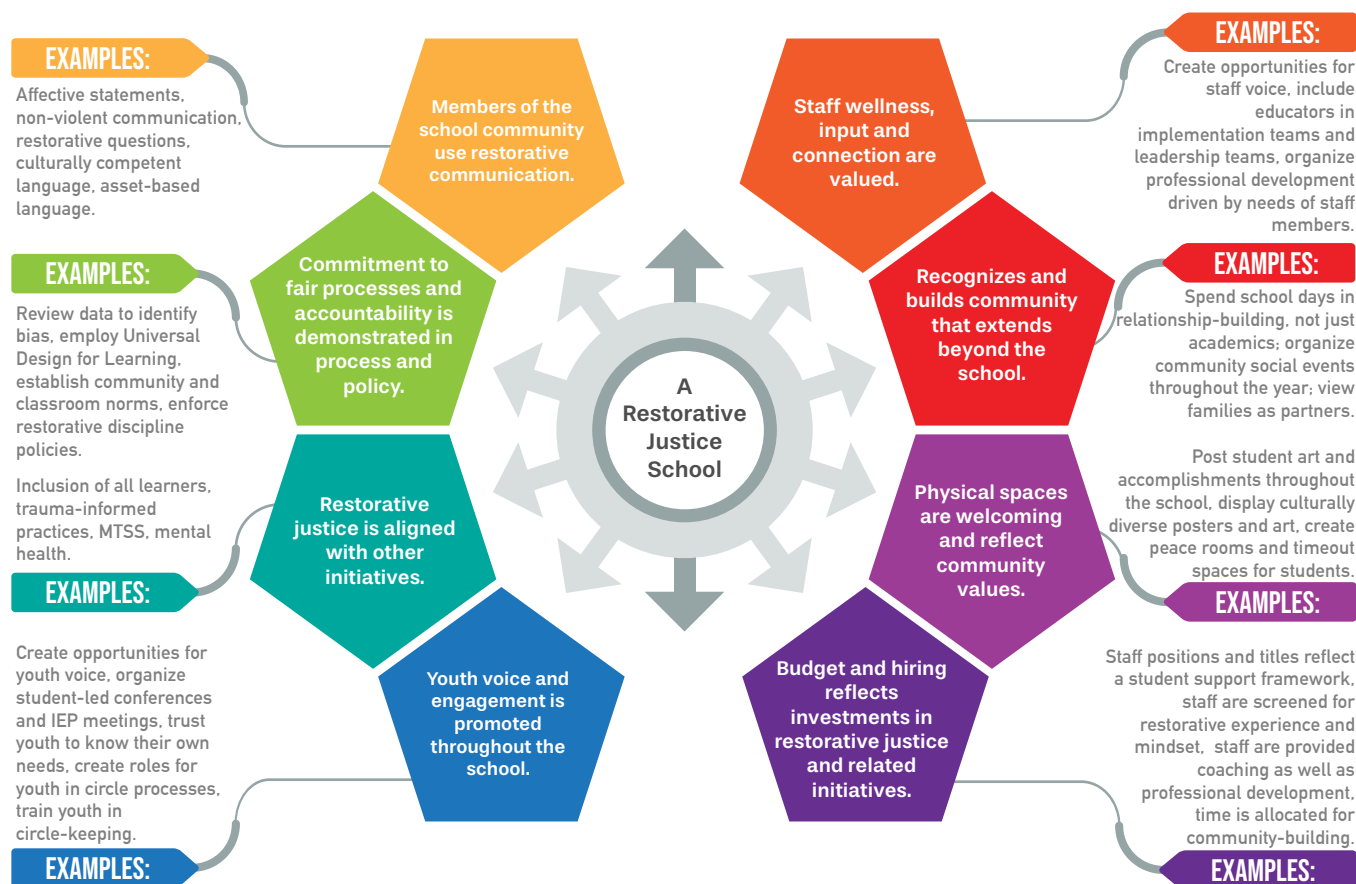
- School climate
- Student connectedness
- Family and community engagement
- Student achievement
- Student support from school staff

Circle processes are a core practice of restorative justice, providing structured, facilitated dialogues for staff, students in classrooms, and small groups. Circles promote openness and shared voice to help build community, make decisions, or address harm/conflict.

Yet, as the figure below shows, becoming a restorative justice school goes beyond circles and involves many interconnected pieces designed to help foster positive, productive, and respectful relationships. This includes establishing clear expectations for all members of the school community, introducing and using restorative language, ensuring that all staff and the students themselves have a voice in the community, attending to the physical environment, prioritizing community engagement, and more. How schools “present themselves” to staff, students, and families matter. Students and staff want to learn and teach in schools that are welcoming, inclusive, and supportive.

Beyond Circles

Meaningful and sustainable implementation of restorative justice requires time, resources, and a strong commitment from school leaders, staff, and the wider school community. The Whole School restorative model touches all members of the school community and their relationships with each other.



This **comprehensive approach is critical** as school leaders consider how they can lead their schools in reframing school structures, systems, resource allocation, and staff training needs to align with the critical needs of students as they emerge from the pandemic.

Restorative justice is a journey, not a destination.

PANDEMIC RESPONSE TIMELINE

SPRING OF 2020: SCHOOL DISRUPTED

When the pandemic first hit schools and businesses shut down to preserve public health, the DC education community focused on tending to the most fundamental needs of students, teachers, and families as they adjusted to working and learning from home. These included ensuring people were safe, had access to food, medicine, and supports, and had the technology tools needed to connect remotely. In addition to putting new systems and processes in place, educators provided emotional support and resources to help families respond to trauma and manage their grief. The entire way schools were set up to operate and support students was turned upside down and, in many cases, principals and teachers were on their own to figure out the best solution, while also attending to their own personal and family needs.

2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR: RECOVERY PHASE I

This past year, most schools reopened and students and teachers again had to learn a new way of engaging. At the beginning of the year, there was a focus on instituting masking and social distancing rules and regular Covid testing, which required a different allocation of school resources, both in terms of personnel and school space. It quickly became clear that even with these new protocols in place, school staff could not assume that the rest of school would return to its pre-pandemic way of operating. Students were not ready to learn and many staff were still dealing with personal trauma. Schools did their best to respond by hiring additional counselors and building new wellness programs and check-ins and working to diagnose individual student needs.

2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR: VIRTUAL LEARNING

While the majority of DC schools remained fully closed, students and teachers focused on establishing a functional virtual learning environment. The resources that teachers rely on — including textbooks, educational materials, but also the support of peer teachers — were no longer available in the same way. The usual approach to things like attendance, homework, and grading had to be rethought. Teachers and students alike reported feeling disconnected and struggled to form one-to-one relationships and to create a sense of school community with no school building or face-to-face interactions as an anchor.

THE UPCOMING 2022-23 SCHOOL YEAR: RECOVERY PHASE II

There is still much work to be done. The reality is schools were not working for all students before the pandemic. And the trauma of the last two years has only served to uncover many of the inequities in place in our educational systems and processes.

While progress has been made and school communities are coming back together, schools are still healing and working to make up lost academic and social emotional ground. There is an understandable desire to want to hurry through this uncomfortable work, but school communities will be much better off in the long run if they take the time to understand the damage done over the past two years — to both individuals and communities — and devise a clear plan for helping to restore positive, healthy, inclusive schools.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE: FROM LOCKDOWN THROUGH RECOVERY

This image below shows how **restorative justice can play a role in not only recovering from pandemic disruptions but also reimagining how schools can prioritize student and staff well-being and inclusiveness.**

RJ During Reentry

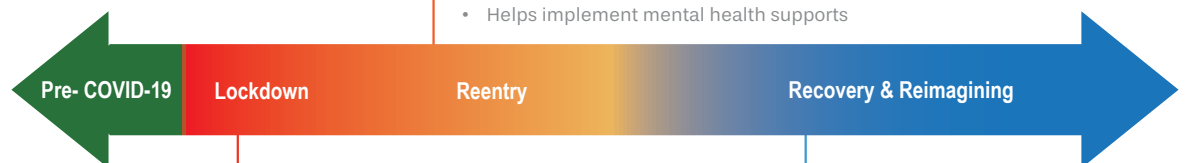
- Aligned to MTSS & PBI
- Prevents conflict & limits conflict escalation
- Helps re-engage disconnected students
- Helps staff support each other
- Provides students with structure
- Helps implement mental health supports

RJ During Lockdown

- Virtual community-building circles for educators
- Virtual circles in school communities for grieving
- Teaching educators to use restorative circles for community-building and wellness
- School & citywide student-led circles
- Restorative circles to discuss pandemic affects on diversity, equity & inclusion
- Virtual circles for students with disabilities & families

RJ During Recovery & Reimagining

- Proven social-emotional learning strategy
- Prevents & responds to negative behavior
- Connects staff with students & families
- Creates space to balance power & address inequity
- Encourages collaborative problem solving
- Creates safe learning conditions for academic recovery



Restorative justice is a **proactive strategy** for building positive, equitable, and inclusive environments as well as a **responsive strategy** for managing harm. The goal is not to focus solely on reframing discipline and resolving conflicts. Instead, restorative practices can give school staff and students the skills they need to express themselves, manage and describe their emotions, listen to one another, and build trusting relationships.

Proactive Practices	Responsive Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent and lessen negative behavior • Support social-emotional learning • Build connections and relationships between individuals • Transform school culture and climate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address challenging behavior • Identify needs • Resolve conflicts • Prevent repeat issues • Provide a structure of accountability

How is Restorative Justice Relevant to Pandemic Recovery Efforts?

- Reestablish school norms, rituals, and routines and create safe learning conditions for academic recovery
- Prepare teachers and staff to recognize and respond to the mental health needs of students who have experienced trauma
- Identify and address root causes of negative student behavior
- Provide tools to create spaces for social-emotional learning and expression
- Connect staff with students and families
- Establish policies and processes that promote trust, compassion, inclusivity, accountability, safety, equity, collaboration, and growth

How to Use This Toolkit

The remainder of this toolkit is designed to provide an overview of how restorative practices can be applied to address **focused goals related to and integrated with other pandemic recovery efforts to rebuild and maintain school communities**. These include:

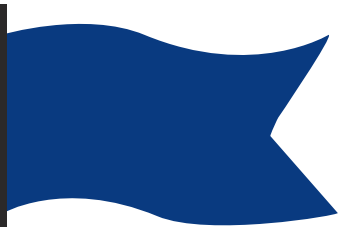


In addition, there is a section on **the role of the school leader in supporting restorative justice** and **guidance on how to get started** that can be tailored to individual school needs and capacity.

Endnotes

¹ Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N. & Petrosino, A. (March 2019). *Restorative justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review*. WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center.

² Ashely, J. & Burke, K. (2009). *Implementing restorative justice: A guide for schools*. Chicago, IL: Illinois Justice Information Authority.



POSITIVE SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

When schools closed, school staff had to consider how best to support students from home and how to create a school community virtually. Re-establishing connections and maintaining relationships was a challenge that required "all hands on deck" with social workers and other staff calling families, checking in, securing digital access, and making sure students were online and learning. Student mental health suffered. According to a Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, one out of every five American teens surveyed had considered suicide in 2021. Forty percent said they felt "persistently sad or hopeless."

Once schools reopened, there has been an on-going need to reestablish basic school norms and expectations and get students back into the routine of not only getting themselves to the school building on time, but also attending and engaging productively in class. This has been especially challenging for students who moved into an entirely new school with new classmates and teachers. They faced a different set of routines and rituals, new grade level requirements and pre-COVID expectations of youth development norms.

Schools experiencing staff shortages and extended absences due to Covid have struggled to attend to the individual needs of students and help address barriers to their learning.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Without a sense of belonging or established relationships, students and teachers are finding it difficult to connect and communicate.

This upcoming school year is an opportune time for schools to use restorative practices to re-establish norms and rituals and **refocus on school values of trust, compassion, inclusivity, accountability, safety, equity, collaboration, and growth**. As pandemic recovery continues, it is very important that every student is seen, heard, respected, and given safe spaces to talk about their issues and emotions. Proactive, preventative, and responsive restorative practices can help schools reinstitute these values as part of the school culture.

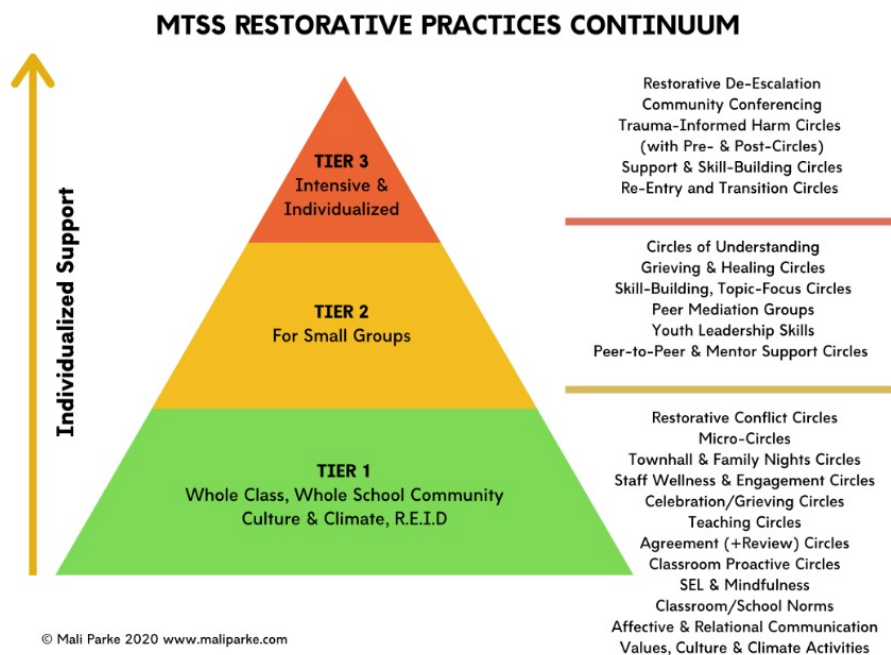
Schools should aim to **allocate the majority of time and resources on building a positive school culture and climate** because those investments will provide the foundation for learning to happen. Working to make students and staff feel welcome and respected can lead to reduced disruptions and incidents of negative behavior, keep students in the classroom, and allow school staff to attend to students' academic and social-emotional needs.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES AND TIME ALLOCATION

80% Building Positive School Culture & Climate Safety, Inclusion, Equity, Physical Environment, Adult-Student Relationships, Social-Emotional Learning, Interpersonal Communication	20% Responsive and Disciplinary Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students ready and able to learn Adults able to connect and teach Reduced incidents of negative behavior 	Reduced repeat behavior and time out of class

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Utilizing the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework, restorative justice approaches can be placed on a continuum. The whole school benefits from general supports, strategies, and early interventions, while targeting more intensive support to the students who need it most. This begins with establishing a shared vision, school and classroom norms, positive communication, and instituting a process of using circles and other practices to bring together the school community for reflective and restorative conversations.

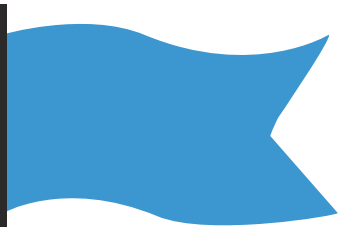


A cornerstone of restorative approaches is the use of proactive circles that use a structured process to encourage participants to talk and listen to one another. This can include staff circles that bring educators together to share experiences and support one

another as well as student-focused circles. For example, morning circles give students a chance to share how they are feeling before they begin a day of academic work. These circles promote and **support social-emotional learning** as they encourage students to communicate in a positive and productive manner. They also allow teachers to model restorative language and empathy. Classroom "check-in check-out" circles can provide helpful structure for younger students in elementary classrooms. Restorative practices can be integrated with other interventions and initiatives such as trauma-informed care, SEL curriculums, student engagement activities, and mental health supports.

In one DCPS School, 30 minutes of every school day is reserved for community building circles in classrooms. The Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) team trains staff on tier 1 practices, provides circle flows and scripts, and empowers teachers to adapt the circles they use in their classrooms based on student needs. When teachers notice students have a lot of energy and need to express themselves, the circle might have a lot of movement and center creative expression. Other times the circles will be more focused on social-emotional skills like self-awareness, relationship building, or reinforcing instructional content. Circles can also be used to build joy and community by having the students play a game of telephone or 7-Up.

In DC Public Charter School, the school leader established a new staff support position who acts as Student Liaison to the staff for grades 2-5. The school has found this role to be very instrumental in reminding students of school norms and respectful group interactions. One of the many ways this staff person creates a bridge between students and staff is a Lunch Bunch (tier 2) program. The lunch groups uses community building circles to support students who need smaller groups to build relationships, increase their social skills, and process peer interactions. Lunch Bunches are a social, relaxed time, as opposed to being in the whole class environment.



RESTORATIVE DISCIPLINE

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

The social isolation and stress of the pandemic has resulted in increased levels of violence and threats in schools. According to a national survey led by the American Psychological Association, one-third of teachers experienced at least one incident of verbal harassment or threat of violence from students during the first full pandemic school year, and 14 percent were physically attacked.¹ Even before the pandemic, a large share of DC children and youth up to age 17 were likely to be exposed to traumatic events: 21.3 percent have been exposed to an adverse childhood experience (ACE).²

The violence continues to affect DC communities to the point that many students worry for their safety and are afraid to leave home and make their way to school every day. The high crime rate is a serious deterrent and a challenge for schools as they work to re-engage students.

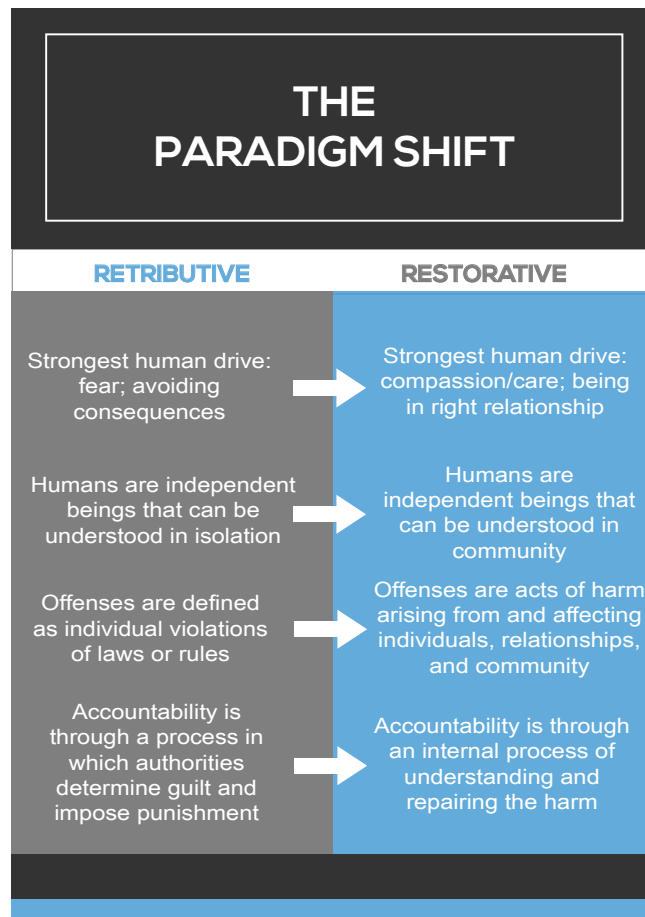
Ideally, schools are seen as safe places for students and staff. But the extended trauma, the isolation, and the stress of the past two years has broken down bonds of trust and familiarity.

Without established and trusting relationships, schools continue to report high levels of student misbehavior and violence.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

Schools have identified restorative practices as a way to break this cycle of negativity **and move towards a supportive stance of helping students navigate challenging situations and avoid future misbehavior.** After two years of pandemic disruptions, the 2022–23 school year should begin with a focus on establishing equitable and inclusive relationships of trust, understanding and collaboration between and among school staff, students and families.

The research is clear that punitive discipline is not effective and harms students by excluding them from the learning environment – contributing to racial and special education discipline inequities. When students are suspended and expelled from school, they miss out on learning time and often fall behind their peers. These students are much more likely to continue to act out in frustration, be the victims of implicit bias, and therefore, are much more likely to engage with law enforcement, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.³



The goal for this year is to ensure *all* students are in classrooms, engaging with teachers and peers in a supportive and productive learning environment. Schools need to do away with punitive disciplinary policies that isolate students and serve as a barrier to social emotional and academic recovery. Restorative justice can help schools meet the spirit and letter of the **Student Fair Access to School Act**. The Act establishes limits to the number of suspension days for a single incident and suspension days in one school year, while also providing critical student protections.

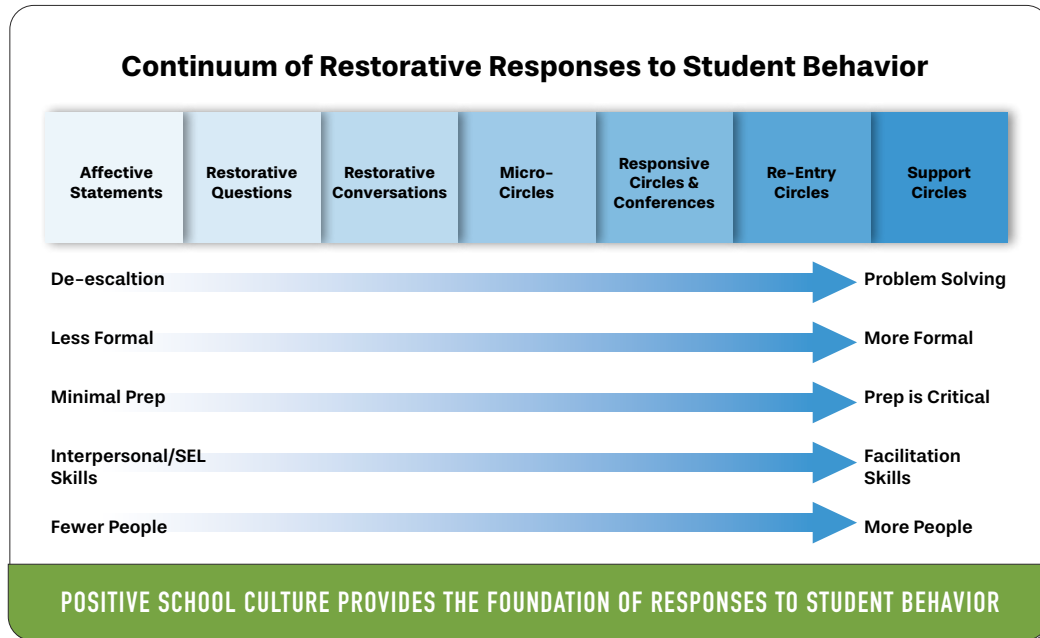
TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

Schools can take a **restorative approach to discipline and implement a series of tiered practices**. This includes giving students and staff the communication tools and strategies to help avoid conflict in the first place and respond appropriately when harm does happen.

Circles and conferences can be utilized as an alternative to suspensions and to mitigate the time out of school by utilizing an accountability framework that prioritizes creating a shared understanding of the impacts of the harm, and agreements about what will be done to address the harm. **Support circles, truancy support circles and re-entry circles** focus less on a specific incident of harm, but instead bring the right people together for understanding and problem-solving complex needs and patterns of behavior.

A key element of restorative professional development for school staff and leadership is knowing how to choose the right restorative approach based on the specific situation.

Schools can assign "floating coaches" who visit classrooms to monitor student behavior and intervene early to ensure problems are managed and supports are provided as needed.



In one DCPS PreK3–8 school, for example, **safe spaces are provided in every single classroom in the building**. This can be a corner of the room with beanbag chairs, fidget tools and/or writing and drawing materials where students can opt to go to practice self awareness and self management.

The same school is also **including families in responsive and support circles** when there is conflict that involves multiple students. This gives the families full information and involvement in supporting and holding the student accountable at home. It also helps students to feel fully supported in their efforts to learn and repair after conflict. This has been particularly powerful post virtual learning as schools are rebuilding connection to parents and community that was strained by school closures during the pandemic.

A DCPS Education campus (MS & HS) arranged for a series of **scenario-based training for all staff on micro circles, restorative conversations, and restorative communication**. The goal is to build staff capacity to proactively identify and de-escalate conflict as a preventative Tier 1 approach. This approach also helps build towards a culture of support rather than punishment, and models restorative language and conflict skills like self awareness and regulation for students.

Schools can also **examine and revise discipline policies**, shifting away from punishment and towards a more supportive stance of helping students navigate challenging situations. For example, one DC Public Charter School that had relied on "no tolerance" discipline policies, chose to adopt a restorative justice approach that focused on positive student engagement and community building. Teachers and staff discussed how they might respond differently to students who make mistakes. Could they have more regular check-ins with students and take time to help students work through their feelings? How were tough policies driving students away from school rather than **helping students learn critical skills such as self-management, socialization, communication, and empathy**? The school's executive director shared that: "Students need to feel comfortable knowing that just as they are allowed to make academic mistakes. They are also allowed to make mistakes in their social and emotional growth."

Endnotes

¹ McMahon, S.D., Anderman, E.M., Astor, R.A., Espelage, D.L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L.A., & Worrell, F.C. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Policy Brief. American Psychological Association.

² https://www.america'shealthrankings.org/explore/health-of-women-and-children/measure/overall_hwc_a/state/DC

³ Morgan, H. (2021). *Restorative justice and the school-to-prison pipeline: A review of existing literature*. Education Sciences. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1293515.pdf>



YOUTH/STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

The pandemic not only resulted in less face-to-face instructional time with teachers, it also gave students **fewer opportunities to interact with peers and to develop key social-emotional skills**.

These gaps in developmental skills are evident in the return to in-person school. Many students continue to feel disconnected from their peers, their teachers, and their school communities. Many suffered **personal trauma** over the past few years and are still recovering from emotional and financial stresses.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

As part of the pandemic recovery this upcoming school year, schools should plan to dedicate time for restorative work to **acknowledge the grief, uncertainty and unresolved trauma students (and school staff) are grappling with**. Recent scientific findings are confirming that our ability to feel belonging is a critical first step to healing.¹

As core members of a school community, students should be given a voice on issues that impact them and can help lead and support efforts to reestablish connections and build a positive school culture. Restorative justice empowers students to build connections and relationships, raise issues, ask questions, air grievances, resolve conflicts, and support one another. When students are provided regular opportunities to practice their restorative skills in action, there is a decrease in suspensions, expulsions, student-to-student conflicts, and an improvement in school culture.

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

Restorative justice provides an opportunity for school administrators and teachers to find ways to **connect with individual students to see how they are feeling, where they might need support, and to work to get them re-engaged as part of the larger school**. This individualized approach meets students where they are.

Schools can also organize forums that bring students together. RestorativeDC

“SOMETIMES YOU THINK YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE GOING THROUGH WHAT YOU ARE FEELING, BUT IN CIRCLES YOU HEAR THAT YOU AREN'T THE ONLY ONE EXPERIENCING TOUGH TIMES.”

— STUDENT, DCPS HIGH SCHOOL

and four DC schools launched **Our School Our Voice (OSOV)** which provides students with the space to connect with peers from other schools through citywide circles to share their stories and struggles. Selected students are trained as "circle keepers" who design and facilitate peer groups in restorative circles. This responsibility includes selecting the session topics, designing the flow of sessions, and engaging their peers in dialogue. The opportunity to be seen and heard as leaders and changemakers has proven to be a very effective way of engaging students and raising their voices. It also gives students more confidence and helps them **develop critical social-emotional skills, including relationship skills, personal responsibility, self-advocacy, and self-confidence.**



Teachers can also enact small changes in classrooms designed to raise youth voices. For example, they might **invite students to co-facilitate classroom academic activities and community building circles.** Youth can also be brought into decision making and acknowledged as experts. When setting norms and building common language, for instance, youth can contribute specific language suggestions based on terms they use and through gathering their input on how they like to engage. This allows for more empowered and authentic discussion around norms and language.

Students can be encouraged to set learning goals for themselves as a way to help them take charge of their own learning, evaluate and understand their growth, and practice self awareness and advocacy around how to reach those goals. Student-led conferences and IEP meetings.

Peer court and mediation programs provide a way of consistently including youth in the discipline process, giving them a role, agency transparency, and voice.

Endnotes

¹Lieberman, Matthew (2013). *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. Crown Publishing Group.



STAFF ENGAGEMENT

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

The pandemic has been particularly hard on teachers, school leaders, and school staff. When schools closed, they had to immediately respond with remote learning plans and methods of ensuring students could access basic supports from home. **Staff have worked under incredibly stressful conditions over the last two years and their wellness has suffered.**

According to a recent report from the American Psychological Association (APA), teachers feel unsafe, lack supportive work environments, and feel they have limited input into school policies and procedures, which only serves to compound their high stress levels.¹ The APA brief also reported findings from a national survey, including that almost half of all teachers desire or plan to quit or transfer their jobs due to concerns about school climate and school safety.²

THE OPPORTUNITY:

Given how demoralized and exhausted teachers and staff are at this point in the pandemic recovery, school leaders can use restorative practices to improve the culture of the school and make it more welcoming and positive for the adults in the building, as well as the students. School staff need opportunities for **emotional support, team building, and time to work collaboratively** to reestablish relationships with peers and rebuild community.

Teaching staff restorative practices can help them communicate better and give them the tools and strategies they need to build positive relationships with students and other school staff.

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

Circle processes are a core part of the restorative practice and are not just for students. Adults in the building can participate in **regular staff community building circles** to help encourage teamwork and mutual care and foster understanding and trust. By building circles into the "way things are done" at school, such as part of staff or team meetings, leaders can help create connections among staff, give them practice so they feel comfortable organizing

“[RESTORATIVE JUSTICE] ALLOWS PEOPLE TO BE VULNERABLE AND COLLABORATIVE ABOUT ADDRESSING THINGS IN OUR SCHOOL – AND CREATES AN ENVIRONMENT FOR US TO WORK TOGETHER TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC GOALS.”

— PRINCIPAL

them for students, and hold everyone accountable for doing their part in fostering a more open and honest learning environment.

In the process of participating in circles, teachers learn and get practice using strategies for **self-care, conflict resolution, and restorative communication** that can help them manage their own stress and mental health needs. To deepen the work, teachers can do peer observations followed by debriefs and reflections on the implementation of restorative justice in their classrooms.

For example, a DC Public Charter School has been utilizing **restorative justice community building circles during scheduled professional development time** as a way to have staff check in with one another, build community, address concerns, and plan for the upcoming school year. As a result staff voice has been elevated, harm has been addressed in a healthy way, and relationships have been repaired.

A DCPS school has been providing **training on conflict styles** to help staff understand their own style and to feel more prepared in managing conflict with students and among themselves. This investment in skill building helps staff feel prepared and supported to handle the complexity of this pandemic recovery period.

One DC public middle school has been intentional about having **co-facilitated, cross-team staff circles to give space for staff to share how they are doing with peers from other teams, discuss challenges, and build community in a way that is mindful of power dynamics**. This approach has the benefit of allowing leadership to be a part of the circles rather than only leading them.

Endnotes

¹ McMahon, S.D., Anderman, E.M., Astor, R.A., Espelage, D.L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L.A., & Worrell, F.C. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Policy Brief. American Psychological Association.

² McMahon, S.D., Anderman, E.M., Astor, R.A., Espelage, D.L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L.A., & Worrell, F.C. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Policy Brief. American Psychological Association.



FAMILY/COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

With students logging in and learning from home, the pandemic opened the door for families to **engage with teachers and school staff in new ways, dramatically shifting their relationship as direct school partners**. Families absolutely expect to maintain that level of connection in the future.

With the return to in-person learning, schools are working to form collaborative relationships with families, knowing that in doing so, students – and the school community at large – benefit. Research shows that family partnerships help build trust between school and home, and moreover, improves student academic learning.¹

THE OPPORTUNITY:

When planning for the 2022–23 school year, leaders should consider how to take a restorative approach to family engagement, going beyond simply responding to individual incidents with students and instead working to **build deeper two-way relationships**. This acknowledges that students are part of a broader community and that those relationships impact a student's ability to function in and contribute to a productive learning environment.

For some schools, this is a shift. School staff are not used to engaging with families on a regular basis and see a clear divide between home and school. Teachers support the notion of parents and caregivers providing support for their children at home, but opportunities for collaboration and connection between school and home are often limited due to time and structural issues. Teachers and school staff might feel overwhelmed by what they are asked to accomplish during the school day, while families are looking to advocate for their individual child's needs.

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

As schools work to establish a restorative mindset and institute restorative practices, they can also use the opportunity to **engage families in building their own understanding of the power of restorative practices and encourage them to use them at home**. This requires schools to reach out to families and help share the research, teach them restorative justice practices, outline school expectations, and suggest how parents/caretakers can have parallel conversations at home.

Some families might have concerns that a move towards restorative justice and away from strict disciplinary policies might make schools less safe or that

students will not be held accountable for misbehavior. Schools need to convey that misbehavior will in fact be attended to, just not with an exclusionary approach, and that the focus is on giving students the emotional and communication skills they need to cope with and manage conflict and anger.

Some DC schools have been intentional about continuing **virtual events for families and making the recordings available afterwards** to encourage parents and caregivers to participate in and contribute to school discussions. Schools are making more efforts to send out regular updates via bulletins and newsletters, and making them available in other languages so family members who might not be proficient in English can read them.

Families can be included in proactive, preventative and responsive restorative practices.

One public charter school was holding weekly community building circles for middle school students who needed extra support in social emotional learning (tier 2). Once a month, a few family members were invited to be part of the circle. The parents participated in the circle, along with the students and staff, and their role was to be a stakeholder representative of the larger social emotional environment that the students are a part of in their everyday lives. Family members were able to share with other parents about restorative justice, the circle experience, and the impact on the students. When a parent was present the students behaved better and were more engaged. The parents reported that they appreciated being invited and being asked to be included in a school activity other than being asked to come to the school when their child was either in trouble or getting an award.

One DCPS education campus held **family community building circles** as part of back to school night to promote connections between families and share experiences across language and cultural barriers.

Many schools have experienced situations where student conflict stems from, or at least is exacerbated by, what is happening in the broader community. A responsive circle or conference provides a structure for family members or other community members to engage constructively in resolving issues and de-escalating complex situations.



"RESTORATIVE COACHING HAS HELPED ME GREATLY IN TALKING WITH PARENTS AND GUARDIANS WHO SOMETIMES APPROACH ME ABOUT DISCIPLINARY ISSUES WITH AN ANGRY, AGGRESSIVE OR BLAMING MANNER. I HAVE LEARNED HOW TO LISTEN COMPASSIONATELY AND WITH GENUINE WARMTH AND OPENNESS WITHOUT NECESSARILY AGREEING WITH THEIR PERSPECTIVE. THEY GET THAT I REALLY DO CARE ABOUT THEM AND THEIR STUDENT EVEN AS I EXPLAIN WHAT WE CAN AND CANNOT DO FOR THEM."

— PCS SCIENCE TEACHER

Endnotes

¹ <https://kappanonline.org/davidson-building-trust-elevating-voices-sharing-power-family-partnership/>



STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

Students with disabilities make up approximately 15 percent of DCPS and public charter school students.¹ When schools closed, many students with special education plans had missed or delayed services and loss of instructional time in the period of distance learning. It is likely that many of them struggled to stay focused and on task at home without the support of trained school staff by their side.

Now that school has resumed, schools are finding that students with disabilities are more likely to remain disengaged and disconnected. There is evidence of higher rates of absenteeism for this population², which serves to compound existing achievement gaps that predated the pandemic and keeps them from rebuilding needed social connections. Students who feel isolated and disconnected are more likely to lash out with disruptive behavior that can be caused by a manifestation of their disability and/or a result of frustration, anger, anxiety, or depression as a result of not having their educational needs met.

THE OPPORTUNITY:

As schools look to bring students back into the fold and assess individual needs, it is important to take an empathetic stance and to focus on restorative thinking and behaviors for all students, but especially those with disabilities. Teachers and staff should learn about the **specific techniques and strategies that are most effective in working restoratively with young people.**

Members of behavior teams and social workers should also work to **build relationships with students so they can understand their unique challenges. This allows staff to determine the best approach to support the student's academic, social, and emotional growth via** personalization interventions and targeted skill-building.

Schools can use restorative practices to bridge the student support and academic components of the school, including **reviewing and improving special education processes and services and connecting with other resources and interventions.**



Restorative justice calls for the inclusion of all members of a community. This means creating opportunities for students receiving special education services to have **meaningful involvement in leading and supporting restorative justice practices** and participating in the educational community.

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

Schools can take a number of approaches to apply restorative concepts and practices on behalf of students with disabilities.

Restorative justice supports inclusion

- Focuses on the whole child rather than emphasizing limitations
- Strengthens collaboration of all stakeholders in supporting the success of the student
- Promotes disability awareness and understanding of individual needs

A DC Public Charter School intentionally **taught self-determination skills to students with disabilities** as part of the preparation for a restorative support circle. The support circle is intended to help identify and problem solve around individual student needs. The school staff helped students to identify their personal strengths, weaknesses, and preferences and gave them the skills to effectively communicate their needs. With enhanced self-determination skills, students were able to actively participate and problem-solve with adults (school staff and family members) and make agreements about what could be done to support the student in being academically and socially successful.

Schools can also **hold IEP meetings using circle processes to promote inclusion of student and family voices and shared ownership of the IEP by all key parties**. This format encourages greater input on student strengths, areas of need, and future goals.

Circles can also be used for **staff community building in support of students with disabilities**. This gives educators time to reflect on positive stories, challenges, effective strategies, and the kinds of support they need to better assist this student population.

Morning circles give students with disabilities the opportunity to be heard and seen. Students with speech and language impairments often don't want to talk because they may feel embarrassed about how they sound when they articulate a word and it doesn't sound correct. "But when you have a restorative or a morning circle, you have that talking piece, and it's your turn to talk, and it's your turn for everyone to listen to you, even if you're going to take however long you're going to take. Everyone is paying attention to you and you have that opportunity to speak up for yourself, as opposed to feeling shy or intimidated when there's a large group."

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/State-of-DC-Schools-2018-19-web-res.pdf>

² <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/d-c-schools-chronic-absenteeism/>



DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION

THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY CHALLENGE:

The pandemic highlighted the **many inequities built into our educational and social systems, harming low-income and minority students**. This includes the unequal distribution of academic resources (funding, effective teachers, rigorous classes, etc.) as well as how students are treated by adults. Black children are disproportionately likely to be suspended or expelled from school.¹ Students with disabilities are also punished at higher rates than their non-disabled peers.²

With the return to in-person learning, the most marginalized populations are the least connected with their schools and school communities. A recent report from the DC Policy Center cautions that, "Given preexisting disparities in the District, the pandemic's impact has likely been even greater for students of color and students from low-income families compared to their peers – and these effects will likely reverberate in the years to come."³

THE OPPORTUNITY:

When planning for the 2022-23 school year, this is an opportune time for schools to reimagine how they might best undo these disparities and design a learning environment that works for all students. This might begin with **gathering and disaggregating data to determine if all students are being given equal opportunities to engage in learning and where there are barriers to inclusion. By examining school policies and practices and data patterns, schools can begin to unpack assumptions and decision points that serve to exclude and harm students.**

Schools can also take proactive steps to address the social-emotional development of students and to help educators to recognize signs of student trauma and understand what students need to be effective learners. **Restorative justice promotes messages of inclusivity and helps to create schools that are welcoming, supportive, and attentive to the needs of all students, particularly the most vulnerable.**

TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES:

Implicit bias has a major impact on a student's ability to learn and to feel valued at school. Schools can provide teachers and staff with **on-going training on implicit bias** to help foster awareness and understanding of how implicit bias is created and manifested and how it affects interactions in a school. In addition to helping teachers make a mindset shift, restorative justice training can give teachers effective practices and strategies.

“[IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO PUT CIRCLES OR OTHER NEW INITIATIVES IN PLACE IF THE CULTURE OF THE SCHOOL DOESN'T CHANGE.]”

— DC PRINCIPAL

School leaders and staff can also **interrogate embedded power dynamics in schools**. How can conversations be structured so that the principal and teachers are not perceived as more powerful than students and families? For example, instead of having a principal or teacher sit behind a desk, should conversations be held at a table where everyone can feel respected and valued. Paying attention to how conversations are structured and making sure all voices are heard ensures more productive and respectful relationships.

One PCS thoroughly reviewed its internal policies and processes to make them equitable and sustainable. School leadership team and staff combed through the school's handbook twice, digging into the intent and impact of each policy, practice, process, and system. By going through this dialogue process, they could see how their beliefs on respect, authority, and control had led them to cling to certain policies, and they could let them go.

In another PK3–8 school, school administrators reflected on the reasons particular students were being sent out of the classroom for 'disruptive behavior.' "We were unhappy with the data of who was being sent to the office and who was being punished (overwhelmingly African American males) and therefore we wanted a shift." When asked about data that supports the success of the implementation of restorative practices the principal explained, "Our collection of data looks different right now as we have experienced a shift in mindset and support for restorative practices. Administrators and teachers have experienced a mindset shift from teaching and understanding where students are coming from rather than punishing students for their behavior. Along with the shift is an understanding that it is everyone's responsibility to support students' ability to succeed in the classroom academically and socially."

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2009–10

² <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/disabling-inequity-a-look-at-school-discipline-findings-for-students-with-disabilities/>

³ <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/families-during-pandemic/>

ROLE OF LEADERS IN ENSURING SUCCESSFUL RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IMPLEMENTATION

School leaders have a unique and critical role when it comes to successful implementation of restorative justice. Based on feedback from schools across DC, we highlight key action steps leaders should take to lead a successful implementation of restorative practices – whether in just one or two focused areas or spanning a whole school.

1

ESTABLISH A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF WHY RESTORATIVE PRACTICES ARE BEING IMPLEMENTED.

Restorative justice is not an off-the-shelf program. How it gets implemented differs significantly from school to school, depending on the school's population and goals. The leader's role is to **create a high-level vision, communicate the vision, and set expectations early in the process.**

A first step is reviewing the school's **disaggregated data** on school climate, student performance and behavior (example: discipline referrals, suspensions/expulsions, attendance, graduation, staff turnover, grades and test scores) to help make the case for change and identify priority focus areas.

That data analysis then informs **the vision and expectations** for how restorative justice will work for the school. This should be communicated to the staff, students, and the entire school community, ensuring that everyone is on the same page in terms of school priorities and culture. It is important to acknowledge that successful implementation of school-wide restorative practices does not happen overnight and requires a steadfast and long-term commitment from all staff in the building to really take hold.

An implementation plan outlines **clear goals and objectives** that balance proactive and reactive restorative practices, with relationship building at the heart of the work.

2

BUILD CAPACITY, SUPPORT, AND OWNERSHIP TO HELP ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES.

School leaders need to engage staff in establishing the school culture and share ownership of restorative practices.

Staff need to feel valued, respected, and connected to the work. **Engaging school staff is a priority as they strongly influence school culture and determine what practices take root.** Yet this is not intended to be just one more item on their plates.

School leaders also need to ensure that restorative justice is **not a one-person task**. The role of the implementation team is to help coordinate, delegate, and support the shift to a restorative school. The team should include representatives from different departments of the school who can champion and support the implementation of restorative practices across all aspects of school operations.

It is okay to start small and build. Small changes can have big impacts if they are rooted in buy-in and implementation with fidelity. Give teachers and school staff time and space to explore what works for them, while still setting expectations about where the school is headed.

"If change is going to happen, if folks are going to be held accountable for implementing restorative practices, then there has to be bottom-up buy-in from teachers AND top-down buy-in from administrators."

– RestorativeDC staff member

3

ENSURE THAT STAFF ARE WELL-INFORMED OF THE SHIFT TO RESTORATIVE PRACTICES.

It is important to ensure that there is a process in place for actively examining school policies, revising policies to be more restorative as needed, and widely communicating restorative policies to the entire staff and school community. Some leaders choose to delegate responsibility for **reviewing and revising policies** to a small team that includes voices from across the school.

All staff need to be aware of the restorative-focused revised policies to prevent misunderstanding of the restorative process. Leaders can provide updates at staff meetings and via other communication channels to make sure that staff **understand why changes are being made and their role in supporting and practicing a restorative mindset**.

4

TAKE THE LEAD IN ESTABLISHING A SCHOOLWIDE RESTORATIVE CULTURE.

School leaders can purposefully find opportunities to **model restorative practices** as they engage with families, staff, and students. This may involve directly referring to and using restorative practices during staff meetings, administrative meetings, and meetings with parents – as well as the way they respond to students. Examples include setting norms in meetings and respecting staff voices; having the leader take responsibility for his/her actions; using restorative questions to address conflict; avoiding perceived “positions of power” by not remaining behind a desk or podium but holding conversations in circles or at tables, etc. By “walking the walk,” school leaders can **set the tone for how individuals in the school community interact with each other**.

5

CREATE THE FOUNDATIONAL SCHOOL STRUCTURES AND POLICIES NEEDED TO SUPPORT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IMPLEMENTATION.

School leaders need to **follow philosophical and leadership support for restorative practices with concrete actions, resources, and accountability**. This requires **a commitment of resources, both human and financial**, as well as accountability for bringing restorative justice to life as intended.

Designated staff: Restorative justice requires a coordinator to be designated (or ideally a team of people) to take responsibility for making a plan and supporting implementation.

Professional development: Teachers (both new and returning) need to be trained in the research behind restorative justice and how to facilitate and support restorative processes. Then they will need time to practice strategies, problem solve, and deepen their skills.

Accountability: There needs to be accountability for making sure restorative practices take hold across the entire school – from the classroom to the discipline office. Monitoring key data and ensuring staff are responsible for changing their practices requires focused leadership.

“Doing restorative justice once a week is like going on a diet once a week.”

–DC elementary school teacher

6

INTEGRATE RESTORATIVE JUSTICE WITH OTHER PRIORITY SCHOOL PROGRAMS, INITIATIVES, AND INTERVENTIONS DESIGNED TO IMPROVE THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS.

As part of pandemic recovery, schools are likely focused on building community, strengthening relationships, and creating safe learning environments for students. Restorative justice can and should be **integrated with social-emotional learning programs, multi-tiered support systems, and efforts to support students with disabilities**, to name a few.

For example, restorative justice can be integrated with existing MTSS practices and tiers of support. The same teams that support tiered systems of support can incorporate restorative practices and draw on data. For example, Tier 1 approaches can include class-wide practices that help teach and promote shared values and promote inclusiveness, a sense of belonging, and relationships among students and teachers. Restorative circles can involve the entire class (Tier 1) or a subset of students with additional needs (Tiers 2 or 3) to help students understand how their behaviors or actions violate shared values and affect the classroom community.

7

ALLOCATE THE TIME NECESSARY FOR RESTORATIVE PRACTICES TO TAKE HOLD.

Restorative justice work is **time intensive**. Leaders should be realistic about the effort and time required for teachers to master conflict resolution skills and to be ready to make time to engage with students one-on-one to build trust and make connections.

The school leader is often the only person in the school building that really has the power to make time for the necessary activities related to implementing restorative justice. This can include **on-going staff professional development (with appropriate substitute coverage), observations, time for practice and co-facilitation of restorative practices, and "thought partner work"** — either allowing time for staff to collaborate internally or participate in communities of practice. The team overseeing restorative justice implementation might also need additional time built into their schedules to take on this additional responsibility.

"The role of a leader is to model the school culture, practices, and mindset they want to filter down to everyone else. That's putting a lot on leaders' shoulders, but the buck stops with them."

— RestorativeDC
staff member



CONCLUSION: SUPPORTING YOUR RESTORATIVE IMPLEMENTATION GOALS

This toolkit provides an overview of the ways that schools can apply restorative justice to prepare for and be ready to support reentry and recovery in the 2022–23 school year.

Understand Your Data

When used correctly, data has the potential to transform education into a personalized experience that meets the needs of all students and ensures no one is lost along the way. It can be a powerful decision-making tool that helps determine **who** should be doing **what** for **which** students, **where**, and **when**. Schools can use their data to prioritize where restorative justice can be most impactful.

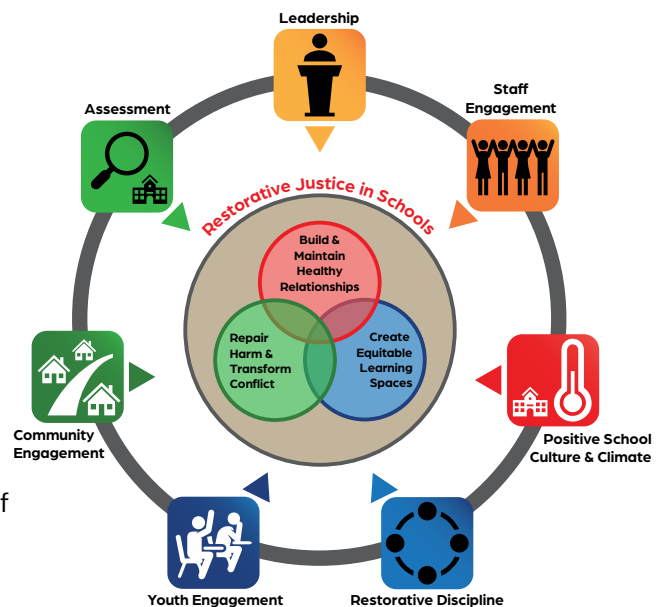
Make a Plan

We encourage you to get started with planning as early as possible so that restorative justice becomes fully embedded in the work of the school, fully integrated with other interventions and student and family supports – and not just another add-on program. Restorative justice can be a foundational element to help reestablish a positive and inclusive school culture and climate that works for all students and staff. By using a restorative justice lens, schools will be better situated to address other key priorities, including:

- Academic recovery and acceleration
- Prioritization of student mental health and increased focus on social-emotional learning
- Integration of trauma-informed supports
- Re-establishment of school norms and routines with an eye towards equity
- Improved family engagement

In most cases, schools **will get started by focusing** on one or two of the areas discussed in the previous sections: positive school culture and climate; restorative discipline; youth/student engagement; staff engagement; family/community engagement; students with disabilities; and diversity, equity and inclusion. **Schools can also choose to implement a “whole school” restorative justice model which encompasses most or all of the focus areas.** Adopting a schoolwide approach requires a long-term institutional commitment towards transformation and sustainability.

Leading a mindset shift and instituting a new set of restorative practices requires time and sustained attention. Continued investment in implementation of restorative practices can have a tremendous impact on creating safe and supportive environments for school staff and students.



Engage Support

Schools can explore training, coaching and other technical assistance options to help ensure readiness for restorative justice implementation in the upcoming school year.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) is funding a number of technical assistance opportunities to support schools with restorative justice implementation to aid reentry and recovery, as well as longer term integration of restorative justice into school policies and practices. This includes professional development and planning opportunities provided by RestorativeDC throughout the summer of 2022 to help DC educators to be ready to put restorative tools and processes in place starting on day one of the new school year. In addition, DC schools can apply for on-going technical assistance throughout the 2022–23 school year.

To learn more about restorative justice technical assistance and professional development opportunities, contact rdc@schooltalkdc.org or visit [RestorativeDC's website](https://www.RestorativeDC.org).



SchoolTalk

SchoolTalk is a D.C.-based nonprofit that tackles complex problems that impact marginalized youth and the schools and systems that support them. We focus on restorative justice and inclusive education—and where those two spheres intersect. Our programs are designed to improve postsecondary outcomes for youth through youth leadership and mentoring, building the skills of both students and education professionals, and engaging youth in workforce development activities.

www.SchoolTalkDC.org



RestorativeDC

SchoolTalk's RestorativeDC is a community-based initiative that provides technical assistance to support DC schools in the integration of Restorative justice philosophy and practices into school communities. Our team has a deep knowledge base that spans multiple restorative justice models and practices, as well as complementary expertise in social work, drama therapy, non-violent communication, positive discipline, coaching, trauma-informed practices, special education, and more. RestorativeDC is supported by funding from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

www.RestorativeDC.org