

Pilot Evaluation of Restorative Justice at Elsie Allen High School
& Lawrence Cook Middle School

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Executive Summary

In July of 2013, in response to calls for change in ways of managing common problems of discipline, the Santa Rosa City Schools Board decided to pilot the use of restorative principles in two public schools. This is a study of Elsie Allen High School and Lawrence Cook Middle School as they transitioned from extensive use of expulsion and suspension to disciplinary practices based on restorative justice principles and practices.

This evaluation examines the nature and impact of the changes that occurred, including: daily attendance, suspensions and expulsions; education code violations and arrests at school; the ways in which violators of school rules were managed through newly implemented restorative processes, including whether they made amends and understood how their actions affect others; the satisfaction of all parties; and whether and how school climates are changing.

A wide range of data sources have been examined to do the study, including school disciplinary and attendance records; data systems developed for recording restorative processes; focus groups with administrators, classified staff, teachers and students; and police data related to arrests, calls for service and incidents.

Changes in Expulsion, Suspension, and Attendance. Some findings regarding disciplinary actions across the two schools:

- There has been a continued reduction in expulsions and suspensions during the pilot period. In school year 2013-14 there were only two expulsions at each school compared to 49 in 2012-2013. Students who would otherwise have faced expulsion have been referred to the Restorative Resources Accountability Circles Program.
- The number of suspensions has been reduced by 24 percent between academic year 2012-2013 and 2013-2014, from 465 to 353. Coupled with a 50 percent decrease in the number of days of suspension per student (from 2.5 to 1.7 days), this means a reduction from 1220 days in 2012-13 to 609 days to 2013-14. This translates into a savings of tens of thousands of dollars in ADA money alone irrespective of lowered administrative costs.

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- Across the two schools there has been an overall increase of nearly one percent in cumulative enrollment.

Changes in Incidents and Arrests. With the greater number of students being retained in school instead of being expelled or suspended, and the simultaneous implementation of new restorative justice procedures for managing problem behaviors, this report reviews changes that occurred in education and criminal code violations. To assess questions surrounding this both school disciplinary data and Santa Rosa Police Department data were reviewed for the two schools. These findings indicate:

- Across the two schools the data show that there has been a sharp decrease in disciplinary incidents since last year. For both schools, the number of incidents referred by teachers has decreased 53 percent from 2012-13 to 2013-14, from 6,375 to 3,363. The number and rate of fights, defiance and class disruption have decreased as well, although varies by school. The small number and low rate of drug violations has changed very little.
- From 2013-2014, there has been no change in the number of arrests, calls for service or incidents at the schools by the Santa Rosa Police Department. Data collected for this research goes back four years and looks at number of arrests and arrest rates by school. In general arrests at the schools peaked in 2012, fell during 2013 and have since remained stable.

Implementation of Restorative Interventions. The major purpose of the pilot approach was to supplant prior approaches to discipline with ones stressing individual accountability, the repair of harms and resolution of conflicts, the strengthening of community, and the creation of learning opportunities and activities promoting positive relationships. Beginning the last quarter of 2013, Elsie and Cook began implementing Tier 2 restorative interventions for behavioral issues that could be managed within the school and which were intended to reduce suspensions. Some foundation work was done to create Tier 1 interventions (proactive and preventive strategies) but most of these are to be implemented in the future.

The pilot began with the training and orientation of all staff on the new disciplinary system. As the program was progressing at Cook, the tragic shooting death of Andy Lopez occurred. In response, restorative personnel devoted considerable effort, through healing circles and others, to address the many issues that arose there and at Elsie. Student peer facilitators from across the two schools were also trained at Elsie and later incorporated into conferences.

The implementation of restorative processes has meant a new disciplinary structure, referral and case management procedures, and new disciplinary codes for the school data system. Offices for restorative personnel were provided in central locations. Referrals to restorative personnel came from assistant principals, teachers, vice principals and principals, staff, and some others. The types of situations involving restorative interventions included conflict resolution and especially suspension diversion as well as suspension re-entry.

Since the implementation of restorative processes in the last quarter of 2013, restorative staff responded to over two hundred twenty referrals involving wide-ranging issues in the schools at all class levels, ethnic groups, and both sexes. In addition to including students as both victims and persons engaged in rule violations, restorative practices also incorporated teachers, administrators, parents, victim support, classified staff, the school resource officer, and members of the community.

Responses to referrals ranged from restorative conferences, these combined with a site based restorative plan, and either of the former combined with verbal or written apology. During the pilot, formal restorative conferences were most frequent, followed by restorative site-based plans, and then formal written apologies, formal verbal apologies, reflection assignments, as well as eighteen circles. Participants were asked to assess their conference preparation, the conference process and plan, and their recommendation to others. Participants in these interventions indicate high levels of satisfaction with the process and outcomes.

School Climate. A final purpose of this study was to learn whether the pilot was associated with changes in the social climate of the schools. To understand this, focus groups were held at the two schools with administrators, teachers, classified staff, and students who had experience with restorative processes. These interviews suggested the two schools were recovering from unfortunate local events, including the tragic death of Andy Lopez, but all the focus groups identified how restorative justice had affected their school and viewed it as a positive development with considerable potential to change school climates.

Teachers felt that restorative justice promotes an understanding of respect among students. Suspending students doesn't make them accountable or take responsibility for their actions but restorative practice "instills hope and then that instills honesty and a level of trust that enables the process to work." Teachers expressed that restorative justice principles need to become a deeply embedded school practice, "a fundamental part of the culture" of the school and that teachers should not be able to "opt out" of it. Cook teachers in particular viewed healing circles positively after the Andy Lopez shooting. Moreover, they gave examples of how the process helped individual students. They pointed out that some students may be manipulating the program and continue to misbehave but teachers suggested means of improving the process.

Administrators held very positive feelings about restorative justice in their schools. Elsie created a class the following term devoted to employing its practices in order to demonstrate their commitment. All viewed restorative justice as far more fulfilling way of managing discipline because it requires staff to think about the underlying reasons for behaviors and the ways in which they might be able to help students as well as a possible means through which their school can complement their commitment to community building. While acknowledging that restorative justice isn't for everyone, like teachers they related cases of how restorative interventions have changed student thinking and behaviors and indicated that they believed these showed the promise and power of the restorative justice program.

Classified staff felt restorative processing was a fairer method of managing discipline and that students were judged more fairly than in the past. Those who had participated in conference(s) stated that students learn skills, how to express themselves, and to be accountable. They also felt restorative staff at each school were perceived by students as accessible to deal with students' problems. They were concerned some students "played" the system, that the process was "not for everyone" and that it "would be helpful to speed it up a little bit." Suggested remedies included bilingual services and beginning restorative practices in the elementary schools.

Students from both schools appeared to appreciate the change in management of discipline. One said that before restorative justice came, administrators "would just ask the teacher what happened...Sometimes they wouldn't even ask me." Students also provided accounts of how their lives and those of others were changed through their experiences in the program. Students became aware of the harms their behaviors caused and how they had changed. Students also praised the aspect of restorative justice that allows students to voice their opinions and tell their side of a story. They also felt the schools now offer choices to most students who have broken rules.