

**OP-ED**

# The importance of restorative practices in education

By Patricia A. Ciccone and Jo Ann Freiberg Hartford Courant

The issue of chronic absence (November 26, 2025) and ‘student aggression’ in Connecticut schools (October 28, 2025) are real and the need to solve these pressing, problems is urgent, and they are tied inextricably together.

The October article ends with the question, “what are we going to do about it?” Data doesn’t lie. There has been a marked increase since the end of the pandemic both in the number of chronically absent students and those who are suspended or expelled for aggressive behavior. What was missing from both articles, is the fact that over a 10-year period (2015 – 2016 to 2023 – 2024) there has been a 33,413 drop in the number of students in Connecticut.

The number of chronically absent students has risen, and the number of suspension/expulsions have also risen by 7,741. In other words, in the 2015/16 school year there were 541,815 students across the state and in 2023/24, there were 508,402 students. The percentage of chronically absent students has grown as has the number of students suspended/expelled from 92,130 suspensions/expulsions up to 99,871.

In terms of the rising number of suspensions, missing as well, is the fact that the largest number of suspension/expulsions are for “non-dangerous behaviors,” which includes but is not limited to behaviors such as not being prepared for class, being tardy, not serving an assigned detention, sleeping in class, missing homework, being out of uniform, and more.

Why attend school if a student will be getting in trouble, often excluded, for issues that may not be in their direct control?

The Covid pandemic and the use of technology are the top issues blamed for these troubling increases. While it is certainly the case that the pandemic was traumatizing and the use of devices, especially those that connect to the internet, have negatively impacted our students, there is more to add to this picture.

We’d like to offer some added context and explanation regarding these debilitating circumstances in schools and suggest a research-proven pathway to answering the 60-million-dollar question, what are we going to do about it?

During the height of the pandemic, educational leaders in Connecticut communicated to districts the agreed upon critical importance of prioritizing students' mental health and emotional needs. As the pandemic waned and students were returning to school, ending the era of virtual education, the stark reality that students were far behind academically was widely shared and educators understood the importance of changing priorities to a clear focus on academic achievement.

In so doing, students continuing mental health and social and behavioral needs took a back seat rather than a priority position, even though those needs were eclipsing the ability of students to focus on their academics, and often so far behind that they acted out to communicate their frustrations.

Students who were disrupting the educational environment were subject to exclusionary discipline tactics (removal) so that those who were ready to learn could do so. But what those students needed then and continue to need now to access their learning, want to show up and deal with their behavioral challenges are high quality relationships between one another and, most importantly, with adults in school.

That went unaddressed and led to our 2023 legislation. Connecticut has been a leader nationally in focusing on the quality of the school climate (community) as a precondition for learning. Students who are highly connected to school do better in all ways (academically, socially, behaviorally, etc.) than those who are not, and they attend. School administrators know that the educators who intentionally create wonderful relationships with their students and build and nurture a positive classroom community (climate) are the same educators who experience the highest academic achievement and lower chronic absence.

It is the same group.

Therefore, it is this reality that provides the best 'Theory of Action' for overall student success and district and school improvement because, as we now know, all learning is relational. Students don't care about what you know until they know you care...However, the myth is that we either 'teach' or we focus on relationship building. And that is wrong headed. All instruction should and can be conducted through the lens of relationship building.

The 2023 Connecticut legislation, obligating all public, magnet and charter schools in the state to adopt the Connecticut School Climate Policy no later than July 1, 2025, was a step in the right direction toward achieving not only higher academic achievement and lowering chronic absence but also reducing the amount of student aggression in schools and increasing attendance.

The policy obligates schools to work restoratively which ultimately reduces extended exclusionary discipline practices. Far too much student absence is caused by exclusionary discipline practices, including chronic absence. Schools that have embraced this restorative framework and are implementing these practices with fidelity are holding students accountable for their misbehavior, including aggression, and are benefitting from true behavior change.

Of course, when working restoratively, classroom safety is never compromised. To be certain, there may be times when students cannot be in the classroom or even in the school due to serious loss of control or total dysregulation. However, in those cases restorative practice approaches foster behavior change via educational components and reparation of harms done to others or property. In other words, they are taught the skills they lack. Simply put, students do not ever 'get away with' anything, they learn the skills to improve and are given the opportunity to honorably reintegrate often without the need to suspend.

And therein lies the pathway to behavior change and improved attendance. Change the landscape around the frightening increase in student aggression and chronic absence in schools prioritizes relationship and community building as a means toward improved school experiences and increasing academic achievement. When relationships and community are sound and viable, there is far better attendance, less student misbehavior and aggression and that relational foundation allows for harms to be repaired. Where there are no relationships and community, misbehavior and aggression skyrockets because there is no investment in others and there is no reason to be at school.

Humans are hardwired to be in relationship with others and do everything in their power to keep those relationships intact. In schools, what gets measured becomes a priority. Within the parameters of our new school climate legislation, countless schools are seeing measurable change: decreasing numbers of suspensions and expulsions as well as increasing academic achievement and student attendance.

Our hope is that this trend in the understanding and adoption of restorative practices will continue. The adoption of restorative practices with fidelity of implementation will benefit students and the adults who work with them. And while academic and behavioral achievement increases, incidents of student aggression and chronic absence will decrease.

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