

## **Introducing Restorative Practices- A Vermont Case Study**

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### **Background**

This is a case study that has a beginning but hopefully not an end. It began for me when, over 20 years ago, I attended a three-day Family Group Conferencing Facilitator training put on by the RealJustice organization out of Bethlehem, PA (founded in 1995). The RealJustice organization would ultimately spawn the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), a graduate school wholly dedicated to the emerging field of restorative practices. The IIRP also continues to be a provider of restorative practices training and consulting materials.

Conferencing (also known in its various forms as restorative justice conferencing, family group conferencing, community conferencing, etc.) is an inclusive circle process that is convened as a restorative response to wrong-doing. It is on the more formal, intensive end of the restorative practices continuum. While a more traditional response focuses on establishing blame/guilt and meting out the appropriate punishment in order to theoretically deter/prevent additional offending, restorative practices (including conferencing) focus on relationships, problem-solving and the repair of social injury. After casting a wide net and gathering a group of affected parties together, the facilitated conferencing process is driven by four basic questions – what happened? who was affected? how were they affected? what needs to happen now?

I attended this training as a Vermont Department of Corrections (VT DOC) professional and left with a passion for the process and for facilitating restorative conferences. The only problem then (and to a lesser extent now) was that there were no systems in place to generate appropriate referrals. Within days of returning to work from the RealJustice training event (again, over 20 years ago), I approached my supervisor to seek approval to offer

conferencing facilitator services both inside and outside of the VT DOC. Specifically, I asked if I could offer my services at my local high school. As prevention and partnering with the greater community were (and are) a part of the VT DOC mission statement, my supervisor approved this request.

I was able to make the necessary arrangements to go to the high school to engage with a group of four - five staff members that included the high school principal, other administrators and guidance counselors. I showed a short video, brought the group through a brief exercise examining how the criminal justice and school disciplinary systems traditionally respond to wrong-doing, answered some questions and offered my services, without charge to them, should they decide to employ the conferencing process. I never received a call back. I was also able, a few years later, after I became a trainer of the conferencing facilitation process, to offer (with a VT DOC colleague) conferencing facilitator training at the high school. Approximately six of the 24 total participants trained were from the high school, but nothing specific came of that either.

Between the initial training I received over 20 years ago and the present day, I have been able to facilitate well over 50 restorative conferences / practices employed as an alternative response within the criminal and youth justice, child welfare and school disciplinary systems. The incidents have run the gamut from the broken windows of society to death-resulting vehicular offenses. The referrals have come from the VT DOC, the Department for Children and Families, Court Diversion, public defenders, state's attorneys and, of course, schools. The school-related conferences have been convened in response to incidents of hazing, simple assault, possession of marijuana, bomb threats, etc. The range of outcomes (based upon formal feedback and my own subjective analysis) has been from at least "okay" to "totally transformational." It is a range I can live with.

In March 2004, I decided to run for my local high school's Board of Directors and was successful in doing so. I was not a single-agenda Board member, but I was transparent in my efforts to promote the use of restorative practices as an effective means both to respond to unacceptable behavior and to positively impact school culture. While many of my efforts were not particularly effective at the time, some inroads were made. For instance, I was able, as chair of the policy committee in 2006, to shepherd language through the policy adoption process that "encourages" the use of restorative practices by administrators dealing with disciplinary issues.

## **Vandalism incident**

Sometime later, on a late Thursday evening or early Friday morning over ten years ago and just before Easter weekend and a week-long spring break, seven 12<sup>th</sup> graders from my local, regional 7 – 12 grade middle/high school of 650 students arrived at the school to perform a “senior prank.” A tradition had developed over the years for seniors to do such things. The plan of these students had apparently been to stick hundreds of white plastic forks in concentric circles around the flagpole at the entrance to the school.

After they had accomplished the “art installation” prank noted above, additional antics began to be added on. Someone had chalk and someone else had car glass window paint (the type that is easily removed from glass). As the use of the chalk and the paint crossed the line to become completely unacceptable (language and graphics), four of the seven students departed the scene. The three who remained kept at it.

Below is a revised e-mail from the principal at that time to School Board members, of which I was one. This communication gives some indication of the damage done:

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Subject: HS vandalism

Hello!

Today ... students and faculty and parents entered our building that had been vandalized during the night...

... I'm including to you in follow-up two sets of pictures that (the vice principal) took this morning of what everyone experienced upon arriving at school... This might give you an idea of what everyone saw when they entered this morning.

... (The middle school director) had an AM assembly with a parent from (elsewhere in Vermont) whose son had committed suicide after being bullied over a period of time. So parents and the

presenter arriving for this assembly in the AM were also subjected to the obscene graffiti and other comments.

The following encapsulates what was written or drawn over windows in paint, on brick and walks in chalk:

15 times on various surfaces, including the front sidewalk, classroom windows, brick walls, front doors and surrounding windows, other exterior doors and the marquis above the main entrance (that would have required a ladder) were graphic depictions of (male and female body parts, along with inappropriate and hurtful words and phrases)...

There were also over 400 plastic forks stuck in the ground around the flagpole.

Seniors were brought out to help with the clean-up with (the physical plant supervisor) for a short time before they had to report to class. Our building was desecrated. This is not a senior prank, and ... crossed the line between 'clean fun' and obscene. It is now "open season" on our building with seniors, it would appear. It is your choice to open the forwarded pictures, but this is what our children saw.

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The act of vandalism affected many people, most immediately those who arrived at school that Friday morning. It also sent ripples out farther into the community as word spread. It did not take long for an investigation by school administrators to lead to the seven students involved in the incident. The four who had left before the more serious behavior had occurred were given community service. The three who had stayed and brought it to a higher level were given the option of taking three days of out-of-school suspension or participating in a restorative group conference. They all agreed to participate in the conference. I received the referral from the principal (the first such referral ever received since the changes to policy noted above had been made) and proceeded with the pre-conference preparation.

As is normally the case, the preparation took a good deal of time, with visits to all three of the offender's homes, phone calls and e-mails to potential

participants, logistics, etc. In the end, all 22 expected participants attended the restorative justice (RJ) conference in the school library. It was convened at 6:30 PM and went until 8:30 PM on a Wednesday evening. All names (but mine) have been removed, but the list of participants by category follows:

Parent, father of Student A  
Student A  
Parent, mother of Student A  
Parent, father of Student B  
Student B  
Parent, mother of Student B  
Parent, father of Student C  
Student C  
Parent, mother of Student C  
School Secretary / Senior Class Advisor  
Principal  
Student (Senior)  
Student (Senior)  
Self-help teacher  
Health teacher  
Student (7th Grade)  
Middle school director  
Social studies teacher  
Vice principal  
School resource officer  
Custodian  
Custodian  
Chris Dinnan, Coordinator / Facilitator

A hard-copy of the following was sent the day after to all participants:

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To: All RJ Conference Participants  
From: Chris Dinnan, Coordinator / Facilitator  
Re: Follow-up & Feedback

Enclosed is the agreement / understanding developed at the RJ conference of which you were a participant...

As I noted at the conference, I made the judgment to let the meeting itself continue until 8:30 PM, as opposed to 8 PM as had been planned. Typically, the facilitator develops a written record of whatever agreement / understanding is developed just after the conference ends, gets all participants to “sign off” on the agreement / understanding and (if possible) makes copies for everyone then and there. I made the judgment call to eliminate this step in order to maximize the time that the group had together and to let those who needed to leave (at 8:30 PM) to be able to do so. I hope that the language accurately reflects what the group came up with.

I have also enclosed a stamped, self-addressed envelope and a feedback form. Please consider taking the time to fill out this form and send it to me.

Thank you for attending and participating in this process.

From the enclosure:

#### **Agreement / understanding**

- Write a letter of apology (either separately or jointly) to the two guest speakers who arrived early on April 10 (prior to the clean-up) to speak about bullying at a “dialogue day.” (The middle school director) will be able to provide names and addresses.
- Take leadership roles within the senior class to develop a project that will be a positive legacy for the class to leave to (the high school). The hope of the group is that the leaving of such a legacy could become a new tradition that might supplant the existing “senior prank” tradition.
- Apologize to (the physical plant supervisor) in person and assist him and his staff with any last cleaning that needs to occur related to the incident.
- Develop together with other students a message (particularly meant for younger students) that the conflict caused by this incident was dealt with at the RJ conference, that a letter of apology will be sent to

the “dialogue day” speakers from the young men, etc. It was agreed that the school newspaper could be a good way to get this message out to the greater (middle/high school) community.

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Feedback forms were returned by eight of the 22 participants, certainly a reasonable return rate (36.4%). The following incorporates the responses:

Scale: 1 = Lowest Score, 10 = Highest Score

Please rate your overall satisfaction with the conference:

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

\* Range 3 – 10, average **8**

Please rate the process as to how fairly participants were treated during the conference:

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

\* Range 9 – 10, average **9.75**

Please rate your level of satisfaction with pre-conference preparation efforts:

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

\* Range 7 – 10, average **9**

- Do you feel the conference properly addressed the offense? 7 YES, 1 NO
- Did you personally experience any benefits from participating? 6 YES, 2 NO

NO Explain (six “Yes” responses followed by two “No” responses):

“Knowing that the boys knew what was wrong and that they were going to apologize.”

“An opportunity to express my thoughts and concerns about a tradition that promoted at times destructive and/or negative behaviors.”

“A collaborative effort on the part of reconciliation, has done my heart good.”

“It provides a different angle some people might not know.”

“I feel that the conference allowed each voice to be heard from many stakeholders and that it just reinforces the ‘ripple’ effect of any of our actions.”

“This is an experience that I would utilize in the future, after seeing the benefits.”

“Being a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, I didn’t have any benefits personally – but I had a sense of understanding that I experienced.”

“Although I did get to express my opinion, in the end I was still very upset that the students did not receive sufficient punishment.”

- Were you given ample opportunity to have input? 8 YES, 0 NO
- Did the facilitator(s) do a proper job in leading the conference? 8 YES, 0 NO
- Would you like to see conferencing used more frequently in the future? 7 YES, 1 NO

Please explain, including any ideas as to how and in what situations this might be done (seven “Yes” responses- one with no text- followed by the one “No” response):

“People were free to express their feelings.”

“Presenting to the faculty at the school so they are aware of this process and can ask questions about the restorative process.”



“I feel that future meetings such as this one will bring a desired result that is positive, as well as lasting. The ultimate outcome will be rewarding to all.”

“Suspension for whatever offense, parents get a bill for whatever damage done, RJ conference final step.”

“Opportunities to extend options of consequences dependent on the offense.”

“Any situation that someone feels a need to be addressed.”

“The conference was harder on the parents than on the students. Since this conference, I have observed the three students telling others that they ‘got away with it.’ I do not feel that anything was accomplished.”

- Please take some time to reflect on the experience of being a participant and share your thoughts with us in writing, including what you think was the worst/best thing about this specific conference and how we might improve the process for future applications.

“I was pleased with the restorative process. I found it very interesting to hear from the different people. I feel strongly about good communication and know in order to have this (communication) one must be allowed to be heard and well as to speak. “Working in a school, I would much rather offer this process than a punitive one... I believe the restorative process allowed for modeling of skills (communication and resolution) and that the practicing of them will benefit these teens now and possibly in their future. The only question I have with the sharing would be, ‘When some people sounded judgmental, is it necessary or important to say to the group (that) we are talking about an incident that included negative behaviors and don’t want to attack the people?’”

“To allow each party to speak their heart was positive and essential. To allow the offenders to bring about a positive change will bring a healing to everyone affected. This too will be equally important to the offenders. They may not see it right away. In time, they will be a better person for it. The parent can consider where they need to take

responsibility, as their children are still in their care. For each of the participants, we will reflect on how we can be more positive and therefore more productive in our lives. This too will be a positive outcome for the community at large. There was a lot to be proud of. The school will be a better place for it. For this, I have been personally affected and grateful. The only negative thing I personally found difficult was hearing a parent practically dismiss the actions of her son. To hear that what happened was wrong, to hear that they are willing to promote change and make amends is a good thing. To know their children have been given a gift – there will be a time for parent to be appreciative. All in all, the whole conference I feel has been a success.”

“I was pleased with the effectiveness and preparation of the facilitator, who maintained the important neutral stance throughout the process. I was pleased with the number of stakeholders (the diversity) who chose to participate. Perhaps we could have trimmed a little of the time off...”

“I thought the meeting was well-facilitated. I felt that I had enough time to share what I had. Even though I got to the meeting late, I didn’t feel that I had missed much at all. The meeting was clearly focused on what the consequences would be. The worst part of the meeting for me was explaining what I had to say in front of the students that did the prank. The best part of the conference was hearing the different people’s opinions about what they felt happened. I also liked how open the students were to some of the ideas and (from what I saw) taking full ownership of their actions. Thank you for letting me be a part of this – this shows me how much (the high school) really cares about their students to make sure they have fair consequences for their actions. Thanks again!”

“Personally, I thought it was a waste of time. The parents had a harder time than the students. One parent didn’t even seem to care about the vandalism. No example was set for other students. Writing a couple of letters was not even a slap on the wrist. The entire student body now sees the precedent that has been established. I expect that things are only going to get worse at (the high school). The wrong message came out of this meeting and I am almost as upset about that as I am about the vandalism itself!”

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The date of this conference was May 13 and graduation was June 10, four weeks later. In that period, much happened at the high school that is ultimately unrelated to this case study. One bottom line, however, is that all three of the young men who had agreed to make amends re: the part they played in the vandalism incident chose not to fulfill the terms of the agreement / understanding arrived at during the conference. The administration also did not choose to apply a more traditional response (i.e., not allowing the students to walk with their classmates at graduation) when it became apparent that they would not be honoring the agreement. As it worked out, only one of the three offending students graduated that year. He was allowed to attend graduation with his family.

I was disappointed and discouraged by this development. As the facilitator, I felt somewhat responsible. The conference participants had not brought up and I had not developed on their behalf a clear timeframe for completion. I should have done so. While it was explicitly stated at the beginning of the conference that failing to honor whatever agreement was developed would lead to a return of the issue to administrators for a more traditional response, I could have taken a more active role in following up. I might have limited the actual conference to one-and-a-half hours, instead of allowing it to fill the full two hours. There was a lot of second-guessing to do. The administration certainly could also have established timelines after the conference but failed to do so. Ultimately, the greatest disappointment I felt was for the three young men who did not take advantage of what was a tremendous opportunity for them to personally “step up to the plate” and accept responsibility and do what they had agreed to do.

### **Graduation speech**

As it worked out, I was the one to deliver the graduation speech that year on behalf of the School Board. The Chair was not inclined to do it, and I was willing. The words were clearly affected by my recent experience, although they may have been largely the same regardless.

Here is the text of that short speech:

“The word is love, yes! It is all about the love!

Take a moment to reflect upon the relationships you have developed here, the experiences you have had, the memories you share, the joy and the sadness, the laughter and the tears. You may be moving on from this place, this community, but you will also be taking part of it with you and you will be leaving part of yourselves behind.

But what does love really have to do with it? What role does love play in the continuing drama that is (this) school?

Well, I would have to say - a leading role! I have seen the love! I have felt it!

But, of course, there is the other end of things - the meanness, the intolerance, the lack of love that leads to loneliness, pain and isolation. This dark and fearful side of life exists here just as surely as it exists elsewhere. Our responsibility, your responsibility, is to take a stand for love!

All the songs, all the poems, all the novels, all the movies and plays, all the words that have been written with love's inspiration are only words if we do not seek to understand and embrace their meaning, if we do not seek to live it.

But what exactly does "seeking to live it" mean? Can we truly be guided by love in our thoughts, our words, our deeds? Yes, we can!

Sometimes, it is easy to let love be our guide, our muse. Oftentimes, however, it is just plain hard work – the challenge, in fact, of a lifetime.

Is it really possible to change our way of thinking? Where do our thoughts come from? Where do they go? We may not be responsible for the myriad thoughts that come into our head every day, but we are responsible for what we then do with them.

As for our words, if we speak without love in our hearts, especially about other people, these words are at best meaningless chatter and at worst 'sticks and stones.'

Ultimately, it comes down to our actions, which truly do speak louder

than our words. Why do we sometimes do things to harm each other? Why, on the other hand, do most of us, thank goodness, do the right thing most of the time?

And when it is we who transgress, who fall short, are we willing to apologize and then work to make things right? Are we willing to earn it? If someone does it to us, are we willing to forgive them? Is healing and reconciliation always possible? It does not always happen, but, yes, it is always possible and it is never too late!

In the end, forgiveness is love's fulfillment! When we truly forgive others or when we ourselves are truly forgiven, it is always a new beginning, a new opportunity to start again.

We may long for peace in our hearts and peace in our world and rightly so, but peace has a price!

Now is the time! Today is the day!

Every beat of our heart, every breath we take, every tick-tock of the clock, we need to take a stand for love, yes! And together, we can and we will win the day!

Congratulations and all the best!"

### **Alcohol in school incident**

The day after graduation, I was back at it and facilitating a second restorative practice (labeled an "RJ case-planning meeting") based upon a referral from the principal that I received just days before. A 15-year-old student had gotten on the bus with alcohol mixed in with his soda. He offered a taste to even younger students on the bus and then proceeded to bring the alcohol onto the school campus and consume the rest of it there. The assistant principal and school resource officer became aware of the situation, and the student's parents were asked to come and pick up their child. The student was not, however, suspended and therefore returned for the next school day, which happened to be on a Monday. As will be further alluded to below, the traditional response for such an offense had been by policy an "automatic 10-day suspension."

The record of the initial meeting (with all references to the names of participants removed) follows:

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The RJ case-planning meeting for (Student A) was convened in the (high school) library on June 11 at 4 PM. The plan was for the meeting to last for no more than an hour, but we had a brief delay prior to the meeting being convened and then there was much to be said and done. The meeting was over by about 5:20 PM.

The participants included:

Student A  
Mother  
Step-father  
Assistant principal  
Middle school director  
School resource officer (SRO)  
Guidance counselor  
Self-help coordinator  
Drug & alcohol counselor (LDAC)  
Chris Dinnan, facilitator

The incident that led to this meeting occurred when (Student A) boarded the school bus with, consumed and then brought to school an alcoholic beverage. He also shared the alcohol with a number of younger students. (Student A) voluntarily blew a BAC of .048 later in the morning. The SRO will cite (Student A) into Family Court as this is a criminal issue and (Student A) has not yet turned 16 years old. As for (the high school's) response, this meeting represents a restorative practice employed as an alternative to 10 days of suspension, etc., that could have been imposed under other policy guidelines.

(Student A) was initially given the opportunity to respond to some open questions re: what happened, who was affected and how, etc. The professionals noted above and (the mother and step-father) were then given a similar opportunity to give their perspective on the situation, how they and the greater (high school) community have

been affected and what (Student A) might be expected to do now to address what he did.

The group came up with the following four “next steps” that (Student A) will be expected to take in order to be fully welcomed back into the school community:

- Prepare a written letter of apology to the (high school) community that will include specific reference to the younger students provided with alcohol. (Student A) was encouraged to share drafts of this letter with his parents and any of the professionals in the group for input. Left open was how exactly the letter will be shared, but the administration is likely to limit the number of teachers and students that will hear or receive a copy of the letter. The final draft of this letter will be due to the administration by the end of the day on Monday 6/15 in order that it might be read (or distributed) to designated recipients by Tuesday 6/16.
- Undergo an alcohol / drug assessment within 10 days (by 6/21) and participate in a treatment / counseling program if warranted by the assessment. The results of this assessment will be provided to the administration by no later than 6/22. Chris will provide (the mother and step-father) with a list of providers in (the area).
- Perform 60 hours of community service by the end of the summer overseen by a mentor who is a recovering alcoholic. (The LDAC present) will provide some suggestions re: who may fill this mentor role. The amount of time was determined based on the fact that 60 hours is the approximate amount of time that (Student A) would have been suspended from school had the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Policy been employed instead of this restorative alternative.
- Attend and actively participate in a reconvened group (mostly the same participants but possibly others as well) driven by the Family Court / Criminal Justice process. The timing of this will be dependent upon external factors. (The SRO) will work with... the State’s Attorney’s Office... to stay on top of this process.

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On September 3, a follow-up “RJ case planning” meeting was convened. The record of that meeting (again, with all references to individuals removed) follows:

An RJ case planning meeting / conference in the (Student A) case was re-convened in the (high school) guidance conference room on September 3 at 2:30 PM and was completed by 3:30 PM.

The participants included:

Student A  
Mother  
Step-father  
Assistant principal  
Middle school director  
School resource officer (SRO)  
Self-help coordinator  
Drug & Alcohol Counselor (CDAC)  
Student assistance professional  
Chris Dinnan, facilitator

The incident that led to this meeting occurred on May 29, when (Student A) boarded the school bus with, consumed and then brought to school an alcoholic beverage. He also shared the alcohol with a number of younger students. (Student A) voluntarily blew a BAC of .048 later in the morning. (The School Resource Officer) cited (Student A) into Family Court as this was a criminal issue and (Student A) had not yet turned 16 years old.

After introductions, (Student A) was given the initial opportunity to respond to some open questions re: what initially happened, what has happened since and what needs to happen now. The professionals noted above and then (the mother and step-father) were given a similar opportunity to share their perspective on the situation.

All agreed that (Student A) has done all that was expected of him. He is facing the upcoming school year with a new attitude, sense of optimism and commitment. He is playing (sports) and is determined to stay out of trouble. Specifically, since the June 11 conference, he has:



- Prepared and submitted a written letter of apology that included specific reference to the younger students provided with alcohol. This was shared with faculty and some of the affected students.
- Undergone an alcohol / drug assessment and has been attending weekly counseling sessions (with his parents in attendance) since that assessment.
- Performed 60 hours of community service. 50 of these hours were completed through (the high school)... 10 hours were completed through a local church. He and his parents also met with a recovering alcoholic in (their hometown).

There was some discussion in the group re: whether what was required of and accomplished by (Student A) should be somehow shared (with the necessary release, etc.) with the greater (high school) community. There have been lingering questions as to why he was not automatically suspended for ten days as directed by policy and what the consequences for his actions were. In fact, the alternative restorative response supported by policy has not been widely exercised. It was quickly agreed that the specifics of any response needed to be held strictly confidential. It was also suggested that a protocol / procedure needed to be developed in order to assure that this option is initially considered and then provided equitably (when deemed appropriate) to students in the future.

There was also discussion about what services may be provided through (the high school) to continue to support (Student A). It is expected by the family that there will ultimately be a transition from the current LADC provider. (Student A) and his parents will remain in touch with (the) SAP and (the) CDAC to address this specific issue. All other professionals in attendance also extended their offer of support to (Student A) and his parents.

(The mother and step-father) shared with the group their response at home with (Student A) since the incident. This response includes restrictions that will extend through the school year. For instance, (Student A) remains formally “grounded” and will not be allowed to get his license until after the end of the school year and only then based upon whether he has earned that privilege.

It was noted that (Student A) has been held accountable for his actions on three levels – home, school, and the juvenile justice system. As a result of an affidavit that was submitted to the State’s Attorney by the SRO, the student had been charged in Family Court with a misdemeanor - possession of alcohol by a minor. All in attendance agreed that further action through the juvenile justice system (presumably leading to Court Diversion or the Department for Children and Families / juvenile probation) would serve no real purpose at this point. The group agreed that, given (Student A)’s response since the incident and the support of his family and the (high school) community, the pending charge in Family Court should be dismissed.

As a direct result of input I then provided to Family Court re: this process, including a copy of the full final report, the criminal charges against this student were dismissed by a Family Court judge “in the interests of justice.”

### **From then to now and beyond**

Much has happened at this middle / high school in the time that has transpired since this flurry of restorative practices activity well over ten years ago. One of the most tangible changes has been the total elimination of the former policy that mandated 10 days of automatic suspension for drug and/or alcohol possession or use and five days of automatic suspension for leaving school grounds without permission. That policy had been put in place in the early 1980’s when “zero tolerance” was the accepted approach and “getting tough” on crime and other unacceptable behavior was seen as best practice.

Another notable change is that the school board, superintendent, other administrators and staff and, in particular, the dean of students are supportive, enthusiastic supporters of the further use of restorative practices at the school. In fact, in September 2015, the “planning room,” which was used primarily for in-school suspension and for student “time-outs,” was re-named the “restorative practices room.” The title of the position that oversees this space was changed from “planning room coordinator” to “restorative practices coordinator.” A new person was hired with a strong social work background.

While simply changing names does not ensure that any systemic change will occur, other efforts were made over the 2015 – 2016 school year. I was personally contracted for \$1000 to make presentations re: restorative justice practices to the School Board and at an all-staff meeting. I also spent a significant amount of time attending training and working with the restorative practices coordinator and the dean of students, including facilitating two “circles” comprised of staff who volunteered to participate. The first was to introduce the circle process to staff, and the second was to have a dialogue re: the use of inappropriate language at school. We used as our guide Circle Forward – Building a Restorative School Community, by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Nancy Riestenberg (Living Justice Press, 2015).

Only time will tell where this effort goes with this particular school community in this coming academic year and beyond. It would at least appear that the stage has been set for further implementation of restorative justice practices and principles. There is certainly an acceptance by many members of the community that the use of restorative practices is evolving beyond simply a means to respond to wrongdoing. The entire culture of the school could be impacted positively in many ways by embracing this new paradigm.

The growing body of empirical research about the effectiveness of restorative justice practices is more and more difficult to ignore. The use of restorative practices has been shown to reduce discipline referrals, as well as the number of violent and serious incidents occurring in schools. Student attendance, test scores and graduation rates have been shown to improve. Students continue to report that the implementation of restorative justice approaches has enhanced their ability to understand each other, as well as their parents and teachers. Conflicts are being resolved if not transformed. This is an approach that absolutely requires passion and commitment from the top down and the bottom up and the significant investment of time, effort and resources over time. It is also an approach that works!