RESEARCH REPORT
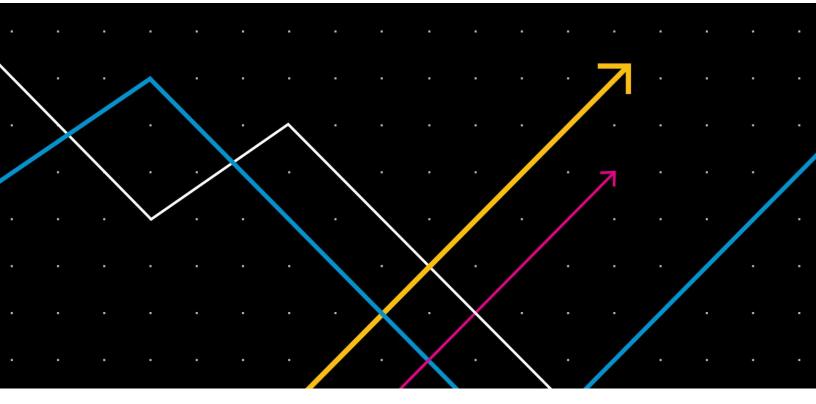
Implementing Restorative Justice in Rhode Island Schools

First-Year Implementation of Case Conferencing

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Acknowledgments

1. Introduction

In 2014, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) solicited grant applications for *Developing Knowledge About What Works to Make Schools Safe*, as part of its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative. NIJ noted that "the Department of Justice is committed to ensuring that school safety practices provide fair, beneficial, and developmentally appropriate services for youth, and in no way contribute to a school-to-prison pipeline."

Under this opportunity, NIJ funded the Central Falls School District and the Urban Institute to use a restorative justice (RJ) approach to addressing student misbehavior as an alternative to standard disciplinary practices, including suspension and referral to court. As described in greater detail below, the particular RJ model being implemented is family-group conferences. These are facilitated conferences between misbehaving students and their families, any victims and their families, and relevant school staff. Each conference aims to reach a restorative agreement to address the misbehavior and repair the harm that it has caused.

The Youth Restoration Project is implementing the conferences. The project was initially launched in the middle and high schools in Central Falls and then quickly extended to the middle and high schools in another Rhode Island local education agency (LEA), Westerly Public Schools, and two charter high schools (each of which is a separate LEA).

The Urban Institute's role is to conduct process and impact evaluations of the project. The process evaluation aims to document the intervention as designed, assess the degree of fidelity in implementation, and understand implementation requirements and challenges. Key process evaluation activities include site visits, interviews with stakeholders and conference facilitators, review of training materials, observations of training and RJ conferences, and surveys and interviews with conference participants.

The impact evaluation is being conducted in partnership with the Providence Plan, which serves as a data hub in Rhode Island. The impact evaluation will compare disciplinary and academic outcomes of students who participated in family-group (FG) conferences in the participating schools with similar students in comparison schools, using propensity scores matching. Comparison schools will be selected on a variety of criteria, including behavior referral and suspension data, school size, school demographics, and attendance.

This implementation report is the first product of the process evaluation and reflects an evaluation of the project activities completed during the first full school year of project implementation, 2015–16.

The report draws on data collected during several site visits, including more than 25 interviews with facilitators, behavior management staff, school leadership, and school staff, as well as the collection of project materials, regular phone calls with project staff, and observation of several RJ conferences.

The report is organized as follows: This chapter provides a brief introduction to restorative justice in schools. Chapter 2 briefly describes the project site and describes YRP's general approach to implementing RJ conferences. Chapter 3 describes requirements to this implementation approach and successes and challenges that have been encountered.

Background

Many schools report significant levels of nonfatal and nonviolent crime on campus, and many students are victims of crimes such as assault, robbery, and theft on school grounds (Cook, Gottfredson, and Na 2010). Higher-crime areas tend to have higher rates of school-based crime. Furthermore, many schools, especially in urban areas, experience significant levels of disruptive behaviors, such as fights, sexual harassment, bullying, and disrespecting school staff—some of which cross the line into criminal behavior (Robers et al. 2014).

How school staff handle both minor and serious disciplinary incidents affects school climate and is an important part of overall school culture. Many schools largely rely on "exclusionary" responses that exclude or remove students from the classroom or the school, including suspension and expulsion. In addition, the presence of police officers, known as school resource officers, in schools has increased from being present in less than 1 percent of schools in 1975 to 40 percent of schools by 2008 (Na and Gottfredson 2013). Whether the presence of school resource officers results in increased safety has not been well studied, but their presence does seem to be associated with more referrals to police or juvenile court systems for minor behaviors (Cook, Gottfredson, and Na 2010; Na and Gottfredson 2013).

High suspension rates have been encouraged by zero-tolerance policies, defined as "mandating the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature," regardless of mitigating factors (Skiba et al. 2006). Zero-tolerance policies can be traced to federal drug policies in the 1980s and 1990s and the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, which mandated a one-year expulsion for carrying a firearm on school grounds (McNeal and Dunbar 2010).

Exclusionary school discipline can have deleterious unintended consequences. Schools with high numbers of arrests tend to be "poorly functioning learning environments" (Kirk and Sampson 2011),

with little evidence that increased arrests or punishments increase school safety (Cook, Gottfredson, and Na 2010). In schools with relatively high suspension rates, even students who are not suspended suffer academically (Perry and Morris 2014). Research has found that suspensions lower individual and schoolwide achievement (Skiba et al. 2006) and reduce the chances of graduation and enrollment in postsecondary education (Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox 2015). Exclusion also often puts excluded students into situations lacking adult supervision, which provides the opportunity for further delinquency with other truants, suspended/expelled students, or dropouts. Juvenile arrests have been shown to reduce the likelihood of graduation and college enrollment (Hirschfield 2009; Kirk and Sampson 2013), increase the chances of later involvement in delinquent or criminal behaviors, and increase the probability of future arrests regardless of increased delinquency (Liberman, Kirk, and Kim 2014).

Harsh and exclusionary disciplinary policies, coupled with their unintended consequences, are intertwined in a complex system within schools that ultimately creates what has been termed the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Hirschfield 2008). Pane and Rocco (2014, 3) describe the pipeline effect as "the widely accepted process of disciplining a student, removing that student from the classroom as punishment, wondering at that student's decreasing academic interest and skills, and watching that student flounder and eventually enter the judicial system."

Minority students experience exclusionary discipline and its negative consequences disproportionately (Fenning and Rose 2007; Kupchik and Ward 2014; Payne and Welch 2010). Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times higher than white students and are disproportionately referred to law enforcement (US Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights 2014). In particular, black students disproportionately receive exclusionary discipline for minor, subjective offenses such as disrespect and disorderly conduct; responses to serious or violent offenses are applied more evenly to black and white students (Fabelo et al. 2011; Skiba et al. 2002; Skiba et al. 2011). School culture, climate, and behavioral policies may be partially to blame for disciplinary disparities (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Skiba et al. 2002). When teachers misunderstand communication styles or behavior of students of a different race or ethnicity, teachers are likely to feel that they do not have control of the classroom and that students have disrespected them or caused them to lose their control of the class; they are also more likely to refer the student for disciplinary action (Fenning and Rose 2007).

The recognition of the negative consequences of punitive and exclusionary policies and of the disparate application of such policies to minority youth has led to renewed interest in alternative approaches to school discipline and safety. This movement catalyzed the US Department of Education (2014) to develop "guiding principles" for school climate and discipline. These principles guide schools

to create safe environments with positive climates and inclusionary policies that seek to keep youth in school to the extent possible and promote the equal application of policies for all students.

Restorative Justice as an Alternative Approach

Restorative justice offers an alternative approach to responding to student misbehavior, without the harmful side effects of more punitive exclusionary responses. One premise of RJ is that responses to misbehavior must help repair harm to victims. While traditional disciplinary responses emphasize punishment, often ignoring the emotional and social harm from negative behaviors, RJ seeks to address the harm head-on. A key ingredient of RJ is "reintegrative shaming" (Braithwaite 1989). Shame itself can be toxic and debilitating when used punitively, but Braithwaite has argued that shame is the necessary pang of conscience that offenders experience when seeing the effects of their offending through the eyes of others. It is this shame that moves offenders to change behavior on their own. Meanwhile, the community is there to disapprove of the behavior (not the offenders), help them recover from the shame, and embrace the offenders as community members (Braithwaite and Mugford 1994). The community affirms the offenders' membership in that community, instead of pushing them out.

The restorative justice process also examines the offense within the larger context of family and community so that underlying issues can be addressed, thereby reducing the likelihood of future misbehavior. It concerns building relationships and empathy among students, teachers, schools administrators, and parents (Morrison, Blood, and Thorsborne 2005). Restorative justice operates under the theory that justice is reached through a process of repairing harm to the victim and the community, rather than through a process focused on making the offender pay for wrongdoing (Faer and Omojola 2013).

Restorative justice has been implemented in a number of contexts, including juvenile justice, where evidence indicates that it may be a more effective means for preventing reoffending than conventional practices (Latimer, Dowden, and Muise 2005; Rodriguez 2007).

Schools have also begun to adopt RJ approaches, such as the RJ conference with facilitators, also known as FG conferences. This approach involves a gathering of the perpetrator, victim(s), family members, and others who have been affected to address the incident and repair the harm that has been caused. Conferencing is the model being implemented in the current project, and it is described in greater detail in the next chapter.

Other RJ programs take a preemptive conflict resolution approach, such as the Help Increase the Peace Project in Baltimore and the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program in New York. These programs involve workshops focused on the development of social and emotional skills that adhere to RJ principles. Woehrle (2000) found that students who completed the Help Increase the Peace Project dealt more constructively with conflict. An impact evaluation lead by Aber, Brown, and Henrich (1999), which involved 5,000 students, 300 teachers, and 15 schools, found that the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program significantly reduced crime and antisocial behaviors among participants.

School programs that foster an environment that is receptive to RJ principles, together with incident-specific FG conferencing, are generally the most promising (Faer and Omojola 2013). For example, the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning conducted a large evaluation of a school program that employed FG conferencing as part of a comprehensive RJ model. While results varied from school to school, the evaluation found that RJ could effectively address disciplinary issues and decrease the number of suspensions and expulsions (Riestenber 2001). Another evaluation of comprehensive RJ practices at a middle school in Oakland, CA, found that the school's suspension rate dropped considerably, as did the percentage of students suspended multiple times (Kidde and Alfred 2011). Similarly, one Philadelphia high school found that assaults on students and teachers dropped considerably in a six-month period following a conferencing program (Kidde and Alfred 2011), and another school in Pennsylvania found that fighting was cut in half between the second and third year of implementation of an RJ conferencing program (Lewis 2009).

In their comprehensive review of rigorous evaluations of RJ in schools, Sherman and Strang (2007) concluded that because tensions may exist between restorative principles and ideas of traditional school discipline, RJ practices can be implemented more effectively in schools with a whole-school approach and broad institutional commitment. This was also the belief of a majority of recent survey of restorative justice experts (Guckenburg and colleagues 2015).

2. Restorative Justice in Rhode Island Schools

The current project involves the implementation of FG conferencing in several schools in Rhode Island. The project is a partnership between the Central Falls School District and the Youth Restoration Project (YRP), along with several other participating LEAs in Rhode Island, to implement an RJ conferencing model as an alternative to the more standard punitive strategies of student discipline.

YRP and the Central Falls School District have been working together for several years on restorative practices, focused on building partnerships among police, schools, social services, families, and communities through training and dialogue since 2008. This partnership has culminated in the current project, in which RJ conferencing is provided by conference facilitators and implementation managers at YRP.[1]

Central Falls is the most densely populated city in Rhode Island, with a majority-Hispanic population of 19,328 people in 2014;[2] its school district serves about 2,500 students.[3] The median household income was $29,589 in 2015, and 81 percent of students were eligible for free and reduced price lunch in school year 2015-16.

The 2015–16 school year was the first full school year of implementation and is the subject of the current report. Implementation began in fall 2014 in the middle and high schools in Central Falls, which were treated as the pilot schools for implementation. In spring 2015, conferencing began in both a middle school and a high school in another LEA (Westerly) and in two charter high schools (Blackstone Valley Prep Academy and The Greene School). Collectively, these LEAs are diverse: They include an "urban core" setting with significantly disadvantaged students and considerable levels of delinquent and violent behavior; an "urban ring" where students are less disadvantaged and have lower rates of misbehavior and suspension; and two charter schools that draw students from both the urban core and ring settings. Table 1 displays basic information on suspensions, attendance, and student needs during the full year preceding the project, 2013–14, at the participating schools. Data were not available for Blackstone Valley Prep Academy, which was being built, with a new grade being added each year.

TABLE 1

Context of Suspensions, Attendance, and Student Needs at Participating Schools

School year 2013–14	Suspensions per 100 students[a]	Average daily attendance rate	Chronic absenteeism
Calcutt Middle School (CF)	70.1	92%	27%
Central Falls High School	14.3	88%	40%
The Greene School (G9–12)	13.9	94%	15%
Westerly Middle School	9.2	96%	8%
Westerly High School	13.6	95%	11%

	Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	Students receiving ESL or bilingual education services (2015–16)	Students receiving Special Education services
Calcutt Middle School (CF)	84%	21%	23%
Central Falls High School	72%	29%	25%
The Greene School (G9–12)	25%	0%	15%
Westerly Middle School	37%	1%	14%
Westerly High School	28%	1%	13%

Source: InfoWorks RI.

[a] Suspensions include both in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

At all the participating schools, respondents reported that the approach to discipline had been much harsher and more punitive several years before the project. There were also reportedly many instances of students being arrested or referred to truancy court.

By the time the project was launched, five of the participating schools had been trained in restorative practices by YRP or trainers using YRP's training techniques and materials. Some of the schools had already adopted some restorative language: One school district classified their behavior management staff as "restorative specialists," and another school had a "restorative dean."

The change in approach was particularly notable in Central Falls High School (CFHS), where the current project follows a considerable reform in behavior management policies and practices. CFHS had undergone a considerable transformation beginning in summer 2010. After being identified by the Rhode Island Department of Education as a persistently low-achieving school, CFHS adopted a turnaround plan, which included school culture and climate as one of its targets for improvement. The school transformation included a number of changes to behavior management at the school, including changes to and clarification of policies regarding behavior management, and it hired four restorative specialists to work with students outside the classroom (Burns and colleagues 2011). The number of behavioral referrals dropped dramatically from 2010–11 (8,209) to the following two years (3,043 and 3,815, respectively) (Burns, Shah, and Dure 2013).

Family Group Conferences

In a family-group conference, all parties meet with a facilitator to discuss the incident. Victims explain how the offense affected them, and offenders take responsibility for their actions, while explaining the reasoning behind them. A conference aims to conclude with the creation of a formal restorative agreement that satisfies all parties, most notably the victims. The plan may include formal apologies and restitution by the offending party, and it may also include other actions by other parties. Successful implementation of the plan within a specified period marks the successful conclusion of the conference process. Not all conferences will succeed, but they are designed to help parties in conflict pursue a common vision for what an end goal would look like. All voices are heard, and participants are empowered instead of helpless and at the mercy of the system.

The current project offers conferences to students as a diversion from possible suspension and/or arrest. A conference can take place only if the student acknowledges responsibility for the incident. Cases include those in which a student has committed a low-level, arrestable offense, including but not limited to property theft (e.g., of cell phones or laptops), property damage, sexual harassment, minor assault, drug use or possession, and bullying. Truancy cases may also be referred to conference as opposed to truancy court. Incidents of school disruption (e.g., pulling a school alarm) or chronic disruption can also be referred to conference as an alternative to suspension.

Victims

RJ is characterized by being "victim-centered," in contrast to the traditional justice system in which victims are often sidelined. The facilitator encourages the victim(s) to come to conference or send a representative. When the victim is a collective entity such as a school, rather than an individual, the "victim" is represented by stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, and other students. However, evidence shows that RJ conferencing is most effective for offenses that have individual victims (Sherman and Strang 2007). In cases with direct victims, FG conferences will proceed without the victims, if necessary, but conferences are more powerful when victims describe their experiences, allowing the offenders to hear in detail the effects of their actions.

Although research on victims' perspectives on RJ is limited, studies indicate that restorative responses are significantly more beneficial to victims than traditional approaches, especially for victims who agree to the process (Calhoun and Pelech 2010; Gumz and Grant 2009; Sherman and Strang 2007).

Preconference Meetings

Facilitators initially contact families to discuss the student's misbehavior and offer a restorative conference as a diversion option. A *Call to Conference* form explains that:

> Your child's behavior is causing harm to the school community. Your child is facing disciplinary action by School Administration, and if this behavior continues or becomes worse, possible legal consequences. However, there is another option to address the problem. You and your child have the option to participate cooperatively in a Restorative Conference. As we have discussed, the Restorative Conference is a method to repair the harm that your child's behavior is causing to the school community.

Following discussion of what a conference involves, both the student and a parent/guardian are asked to sign an agreement to participate in a conference.

Before a conference can be held, an RJ conference facilitator conducts preconference meetings (or phone calls) with all affected parties. The preconference meetings help the facilitator understand the nature of the case, what underlying issues might come up, and whether the parties can be safe together. All affected parties are encouraged to bring an ally, if desired. In practice, these allies have been limited to adults in the school program, for reasons of confidentiality. If parent and child are not getting along with one another, each is encouraged to bring his or her own ally. The point is to maximize everyone's support level so the necessary information comes out. The facilitator also identifies other parties who should be part of the conference. These might include social services staff, child welfare representatives, mental health professionals, or others.

The Conference

The conference follows a clear protocol designed to get at the root of problems that led up to the issue at hand. The facilitator sets the stage, reminding everyone that the goal of the conference is to give the offender the chance to make restitution and be reintegrated into the community with a clean slate. The facilitator ensures that everyone has a chance to be heard and that the best interests of the victim and community are paramount. When group members feel satisfied that they have been heard and their questions have been answered, participants discuss how the harm can be repaired through appropriate restitution. The facilitator will draw up the restitution plan, with specific deadlines by which work must be completed (e.g., property repair) or ongoing work started (e.g., counseling). All parties sign the

agreement. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to monitor progress toward restitution and communicate success or failure to the group. If the conference goes badly or the youth does not comply with the restitution agreement, the case may be handed to traditional authorities.

Schoolwide Restorative Practices

YRP's approach to implementation is to embed FG conferences in a larger schoolwide transformation to an RJ approach, which is broadly referred to as "using restorative practices." That is, a guiding assumption is that FG conferences will not achieve their potential effectiveness if the FG conferences' approach and philosophy are at odds with the broader disciplinary approach at the school.

YRP's approach to implementing RJ can be described as including three levels (figure 1). The first level involves establishing a schoolwide RJ climate and integrating the restorative framework, language, and philosophy into the school. The focus is on communication; building strengths-based relationships among students, teachers, and staff; and creating a school culture that emphasizes students' relationships with their school communities.

Restorative practices include a focus on language and communication. When discussing conflict, members of the school community are taught to use "I statements," affective statements that simply address how a person feels and perceives a situation without judgment or offering a solution. They are also taught to use questions that focus on affective responses, such as: Tell me what has been happening? What has not been working for you? What can we do to support you? (Wachtel 2009).

The second level involves using restorative practices to address relatively low-level behaviors, such as disrespect for teachers or disruption of the classroom or in the hallway. The restorative approach is focused on engaging students and working with them to discuss issues in an effort to quickly integrate them back into the classroom.

Restorative practices aim to de-escalate issues and facilitate communication and solutions. One restorative practice is the use of "walk and talks," in which school staff walk and talk with students about their misbehavior and related issues to get at the root of what is going on, how it can be remedied, and how students can reenter the class environment. This practice is used as a way to connect with students one-on-one in a safe space and handle behavior that is potentially disruptive to other students in the classroom.[4]
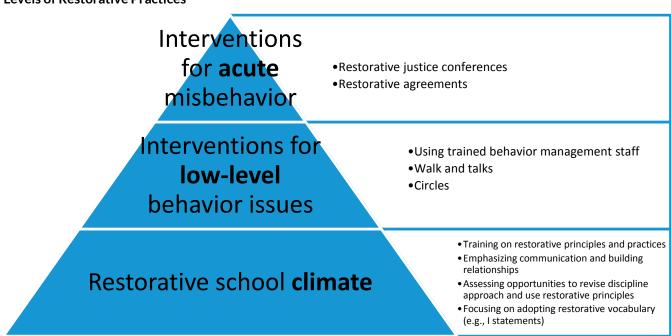
Another restorative practice is the dialogue circle, which "gives people an opportunity to speak and listen to one another in an atmosphere of safety, decorum, and equality" (Wachtel 2009, 7). Circles are used for myriad purposes, including general check-ins, support, and conflict resolution, all of which focus on providing room for everyone to share their perspectives and build a supportive community. Restorative language and turn-taking (often using a "talking stick" to signal who has the floor) are key ingredients in dialogue circles. Circles can occur at the individual, classroom, school, or even community level.

The third level is using FG conferences in response to serious misbehavior, to seek to repair harm and hold students accountable. FG conferences are led by the conference facilitators from YRP. At the end of a conference, participants develop a signed restorative agreement as a guide to keep the student accountable and track progress toward goals. Facilitators follow up on student progress.

In the impact evaluation that will be conducted, the FG conferences will be treated as the primary intervention. Outcomes for students who participate in FG conferences will be compared with outcomes for similar students in comparison schools. In practice, however, YRP's approach to implementing conferencing involves addressing all three levels. Therefore, this report treats the first and second levels of restorative practices as important contextual conditions or "drivers" of successful implementation of FG conferences.

FIGURE 1

Levels of Restorative Practices

3. Implementation Findings

This chapter reports on the implementation of restorative conferences during the first full project year. It draws primarily on documents and repeated interviews with stakeholders. Although interviews were conducted with teachers, school administrators, and school staff, as well as facilitators and other project staff, the role of particular respondents is not identified to preserve anonymity. The report draws on the combined experiences at all the schools to identify factors that seem to support implementation as well as challenges that are involved in implementing the RJ conferences.

The chapter is organized by the major components of implementation. It begins with the effort to implement schoolwide restorative practices, before discussing the steps in implementing conferences, which include including training facilitators, getting the referrals to conferences, and follow-up on progress after the meeting itself.

Schoolwide Restorative Practices

The Central Falls School District and YRP had been working to implement restorative practices in schools for several years before the current grant-funded project. This was less true for the participating schools in other LEAs. Therefore, the participating schools in Central Falls, Central Falls High School and Calcutt Middle School, were treated as pilot schools for one semester of the initial implementation, before initial implementation began in other schools.

While all participating schools had used less formal restorative approaches (e.g., mediations or reentry meetings) in previous years, the 2015–16 school year marked the start of more structured conferences to handle behavior referrals.

Respondents noted that historically there had been a culture of exclusion at their schools, where the norm was to remove students from class and school. Part of this more traditional approach was focused on students seeing consequences for their actions, which was originally envisioned as a deterrent. Speaking about the challenges with this push-out approach, one respondent highlighted:

We need caring ways for kids to move through this conflict so they can move forward in their education and society, really. If we take a child and put them somewhere else because they can't do something [as perfectly as we want], they don't get practice.

Training

YRP began its work at each school with a series of training sessions on integrating the restorative framework, language, and philosophy into the school to help adapt the school culture. The focus was on prioritizing communication, building strengths-based relationships between students and staff, and creating a school culture that emphasizes the individual's relationship with his or her school community.

The Youth Restoration Project provides a nine-hour training in restorative practices. This training serves as the foundation for conference facilitators and school staff, including teachers and behavior management staff. Behavior management staff ideally bridge communication among teachers, administrators, and conference facilitators, resolving conflict when they are able and providing a referral when further action is needed. They focus their work on common spaces (e.g., hallways and the lunchroom) and provide support for teachers to work with students having issues in the classroom. (In different schools, relevant staff members have different titles, and there is variation in whether they are dedicated to behavior management. This report refers to these staff as "behavior management staff" or "behavior specialists.")

YRP's training covers the theoretical and historical background of restorative practices, as well as the practical application of restorative practices. Training is held in three three-hour sessions over the course of three weeks, with one week between each session. The week between each session is intended to allow time for participants to begin using restorative practices and reflect on their successes and challenges in the subsequent sessions.

Respondents reported that the training was effective in teaching the philosophy of restorative practices and implementing key restorative practice tools (e.g., dialogue circles). They also reported that the focus of the training on vocabulary and a common language helped provide clarity to new concepts and what implementation would look like on the ground. That there was focus on a trauma-informed approach to working with students was also noted as helpful.

Spreading the training over three weeks seemed well received. Respondents identified using restorative practices with others in the training and practicing lessons in everyday work and life between sessions as key strengths of the training that helped the focus on applicable skills. Some respondents suggested that spreading the training out even more (e.g., six weeks) and having shorter sessions (e.g., two hours) might provide more opportunity for practice and allow better understanding of the concepts.

Relatedly, some respondents suggested that follow-up or refresher trainings throughout the year would be useful to revisit the key concepts and discuss implementation, especially for teachers. In addition, although many school staff participated in some form of the initial restorative practices training, some respondents felt that teachers needed more refreshers of the content to fully understand the philosophy and approach. This was particularly true around understanding the role of different actors in restorative practices and understanding how restorative practices could be used in the classroom.

Staff Buy-In

One important challenge to implementation concerned obtaining staff buy-in to restorative practices in general, and FG conferences in particular, as an alternative to traditional discipline for handling student misbehavior.

As one respondent noted, "Climate and culture change takes a few years." Respondents mentioned that a shift to restorative practices was often a drastic change for teachers and staff who may have been using a more traditional approach for as long as 30 years or for a school resource officer who was trained in a traditional policing approach. The restorative approach also does not lend itself to staff "being partly in" because relying on any elements of a kick-out model can undermine the success of the restorative practice approach.

Respondents observed that it is important to shift philosophy first and then proceed with shifting action. Restorative practices were sometimes perceived as weak on accountability and providing no consequences. Respondents noted that some staff felt the approach was soft on students and that students took advantage of perceived leniency to continue misbehaving. This was particularly problematic in many cases in which there was lack of clarity on the definition of accountability in this approach.

Respondents noted the importance of leadership buy-in. Examples of leadership demonstrating buy-in included school principals and deans discussing conference referrals, sitting in on conferences,

meeting regularly with facilitators and behavioral staff, and emphasizing the use of restorative practices through trainings and communication with staff. For example, at one school, strong leadership led the development of standardized protocols and guidelines for how to handle different tiers of behavior using restorative specialists and facilitators. Others focused on the use of restorative language and practices not just with students but also with school staff, such as doing circles at staff meetings.

When the leadership believes in practices, there is more flow, participation, and cooperation, and students take it more seriously.

Some respondents remarked that some teachers and school staff had unrealistic expectations of FG conferences and facilitators and expected the restorative team (behavior management staff and facilitator) to fix large or even chronic issues overnight. When this did not happen, this was taken as a testament to a weakness in the restorative approach.

In addition, some respondents highlighted challenges around school staff and teacher time and availability of resources to implement restorative practices. Adopting any new program or approach involves a learning curve, along with time and resources needed to get everyone on board. In this case, it was very helpful to have facilitators and behavior management staff to help teachers juggle behavior management and use restorative practices, although some felt that teachers were still too overburdened to learn and implement key restorative practices.

It is worth noting that school schedules are very busy and have little flexibility. Therefore, leadership support was critical for carving out the time necessary for adequate training.

Facilitators

The project hired conference facilitators in summer 2015, and additional staff was brought on board through spring 2016. Two RJ conference supervisors oversee facilitators while maintaining a small caseload of RJ conferences themselves. Facilitators had backgrounds in social services, education, case management, and FG conferencing; all supervisors had prior involvement in FG conferencing and mediation.

Facilitator Training

Along with the introductory training, conference facilitators learned how to facilitate FG conferences through additional training and preparation, including one-to-one coaching. In many cases, this training was more ad hoc than standardized. Facilitators would walk through the facilitator responsibilities and the conference process with newer facilitators.

Another essential aspect of training is on-the-ground learning through shadowing school staff and YRP facilitators. Facilitators would often shadow behavior specialists at the school for a few days and then sit in on conferences for one to three months, before leading their own conferences.[5] After each conference, facilitators would debrief with the trainers.

Based on its experience with the first year of implementation, YRP felt that the shadowing and joint facilitation that were initially planned just for the training period would be better extended through the implementation period. Therefore, in the second year of implementation, YRP moved to a cofacilitation approach, where almost all conferences involved two facilitators and the ability to debrief after conferences.

First Impressions

Respondents noted that making a strong first impression was an essential aspect of the facilitator's introduction to the school. Normally, facilitators would meet with school leadership, administrative staff, and restorative specialists at the beginning of the year. At many schools, the facilitator was also introduced to teachers at the beginning of the year. Some facilitators found it useful to do a presentation for school staff about restorative practices and conferences at the outset to explain their role and how they could support the school's restorative practice mission. In a couple of schools, respondents noted issues when facilitators were introduced only to a couple of staff members or when the initial announcement of the facilitator did not come off well. In these cases, facilitators found that it took weeks or even months to gain the trust of staff members and to be acknowledged as a key player in response to behavior.

Respondents also noted that facilitators were better able to accomplish their goals by being amenable and flexible to the school's goals and needs. Facilitators noted that this flexibility allowed them to build rapport with school staff and strengthen the relationship over time, which helped lead to more opportunities to further the use of restorative practices.

Clarity of Facilitator's Responsibilities and Role in Overall Approach

A key challenge that occurred at all schools during the initial year of implementation was in achieving a shared understanding of the facilitator's role, day-to-day responsibilities, and place in school operations. Although the scope of facilitators' responsibility was often explained to schools at the outset of the project, respondents felt that confusion about this new role persisted. The experience of facilitators at different schools varied considerably.

For example, at one school, there were concerns about the overlap between the school social worker and facilitator, even though they had very different roles and responsibilities. In other cases, the facilitator was seen for much of the year as primarily an extra hand to help out with everything going on at the school, especially the work of behavior management staff. Generally, this challenge lessened over time, but initially it affected facilitators' integration into the schools and the flow of referrals for conferences.

Another important aspect of defining roles and responsibilities was shaping how the behavior management staff and facilitators would communicate and work together. Respondents noted the importance of understanding how these different actors tackled incidents and behavior concerns and how they communicated about information on students. This was seen as key to the structure and consistency of the overall restorative approach. School staff felt that facilitators had the time and capacity to go deeper in working with students in response to emerging incidents or crises, find out more about students' overall situations, and follow up on incidents. To make their work more effective, facilitators attempted to forge strong relationships with behavior management staff. One respondent noted the importance of the relationship between the conference facilitator and behavior specialist:

> Especially at this school I think the facilitator has done a great job at building relationships with [behavior] specialists. So the facilitator knows who specialists are working with and vice versa so the facilitator knows who has a relationship with which students and how to leverage that.

Because of the important role the facilitator plays in the overall schoolwide approach to behavior, there was near consensus that having the facilitators at the school regularly was essential to the facilitator's integration into the school community and conferences. When facilitators were able to be at a school four to five days a week helped facilitators build trust and communication with school staff and familiarity with students, and it made the administration more likely to use facilitators to handle incidents. School staff also noted that having facilitators on site frequently allowed them to partake and see the school's operations on behaviors and restorative practices and to be present for key decisions. Respondents also noted that the facilitator's ability to connect with students at the school (prior to

incidents and conferences) helped them establish the role as a trusted member of the school community.

In contrast, when facilitators were at a school only for one or two days a week, they were sometimes seen as outsiders, and school staff were more reluctant to rely on them to play a major role in behavior management. At one school, the change from having a facilitator in school one day a week to four days a week was seen as an effective step for incorporating FG conferencing into the regular behavior management approach.

Referring Cases and Preparing for Conferences

Referral Process

Once a facilitator began to work at a school, the next key step to implementation was working with school leadership and staff to establish a process for sending behavior cases to conferences. This could be challenging for schools that saw sometimes dozens of behavior incidents referred to the office each day. Given this volume, it was essential for the schools to decide which cases to prioritize for referral to conferences.

One key element of structuring a restorative approach was establishing a standardized process for referrals to FG conferences. Schools took different approaches to their referral process. In all schools, a student issues and response team (SIRT) would examine student data and discuss student behavior and overall school climate. At some schools, the SIRT team was solely responsible for referring cases to conference. At other schools, the SIRT team met to discuss cases and sometimes referred them to FG conferences—but the principal or restorative dean was the ultimate decisionmaker of which cases were sent to FG conference and often made conference referrals outside the SIRT meeting. Schools also included different team members in the process. For example, at one school, the behavioral specialists did not play any role in the referral or conference process. In another situation, there was confusion of how cases were being handled and when and how administrators in charge of discipline were involving the facilitator. In cases in which the referral process was unclear, respondents noted that it was challenging to decide where to send behavior referrals and how these referrals were ultimately resolved.

Respondents' comments about the referral process demonstrated the value in having a well-established and publicized process so all actors understand the elements of the conference approach. The key to establishing this, in many cases, was improving the lines of communication between all the different actors (teachers, behavior management staff, administrative staff, principal, and facilitator) involved in the process. In cases in which the process was working well, conference facilitators noted that they were brought in immediately for incidents and behaviors and helped decide along with other team members which cases should be sent to conference.

Schools were also challenged in defining what cases were appropriate to be sent to FG conferences. Although YRP provided guidance on what behaviors and incidents are best suited for conferences, schools found it difficult to standardize these criteria and maintain the ability to handle unique cases that did not fit neatly into a category. At one school, school staff worked for many months on developing a list of incidents and behaviors that would automatically be referred to the facilitators for FG conferences. However, they found that cases continued to emerge that did not fit neatly into a category.

Some schools also faced challenges in trying to implement FG conferences for some cases and a mix of traditional punitive discipline (e.g., detention, in-school suspension, or suspensions) for other cases—and deciding which behaviors warranted which type of response. This also caused confusion among school staff about the handling of different students for sometimes similar events. This challenge confirms YRP's approach in trying to implement FG conferences in the context of a whole-school reform to restorative practices.

In sum, respondents highlighted the importance of having a system to sort all cases and, to the extent possible, using standardized criteria to make decisions about what gets sent to conference and what is not appropriate for conference. They also highlighted the importance of communicating with all staff (facilitator, behavioral management staff, teachers, administration, and leadership) about the process.

Parent Engagement

At multiple schools, the biggest challenge before conferences was parent engagement and involvement, which involved the attention and effort of all parties. Respondents reported challenges in connecting with parents at the outset to get their permission to move forward with a conference. When facilitators attempted to connect with parents via phone and even home visits, many ran into bad phone numbers and parents who were unresponsive or never home, especially if they were working multiple jobs. This

missing link was said to hold up the conferencing process, as this initial contact could take two weeks or more or not materialize at all. There were also issues with parents not showing up to preconferences or conferences at all, even after multiple attempts to accommodate their schedules.

Respondents mentioned different ideas of why parents might be unresponsive (e.g., lack of engagement or busyness), but there was also the issue of parents not fully understanding the restorative approach and process.

An additional challenge that arose was parents' lack of familiarity with the RJ facilitators. Respondents noted that parents might be hearing from the facilitators for the first time and view them as outsiders or strangers, and they may not understand facilitators' connection to and role in the school. Some respondents suggested that school staff might be able to help the facilitators make the initial connection with families.

Some respondents believed there might be a lack of clarity on how this approach differs from the traditional approach, despite the description in the call-to-conference form. This might also be colored by the parents' historical relationship with educational institutions in general or that specific school, which was often the case in one district. As one respondent noted:

> Parents haven't heard [about] restorative [justice] before sometimes, and explaining that to them is hard. They think it is another meeting sometimes that parents think we are going to discuss how your kid is failing or what not.

As conferences are being offered as a diversion, the project is attempting to balance presentation of conference as a nonpunitive and restorative approach with communication of inherent threat of a more punitive alternative. Some respondents felt that the call-to-conference form could be seen as too punitive or accusatory.

Respondents emphasized that to successfully engage with parents, it is important to have quick and digestible materials about the restorative approach and conferences and to clarify the differences between the restorative and traditional discipline approaches.

Turnaround Time

It was reportedly typical for it to take several weeks from a referral to conference until the actual conference was held, most often because of difficulty in making initial contact with the parent or guardian to set up preconferences. Many respondents noted this slow turnaround time as a primary barrier to successful implementation.

School staff noted that this turnaround time was particularly problematic for issues that they believed warranted more immediate action or were more serious offenses (i.e., those that typically warrant police involvement). For these cases, in particular, staff felt that waiting two to three weeks to conduct the whole process from referral to a restorative agreement inhibited their ability to respond to incidents in a timely manner and therefore potentially hindered the effectiveness of the process.

YRP and schools have continued working to develop strategies to address turnaround time during the second year of implementation.

Preconference Work

Once cases are referred to conference and call-to-conference forms are sent to parents and accepted, the next step of the process is to conduct preconference meetings to learn more about the student and family and the incident or behavior in question and to explain the details of the conferencing process. Preconferences are conducted between the facilitator and student(s) or facilitator and guardian/supporter. During preconferences with students, facilitators focus on connecting with the student about their family, education, social life and outside activities, community, and then the incident or behavior in question. In preconferences with parents, facilitators find a common ground on which to connect with parents (e.g., discussing their work), explain the process, and ask about their needs and how the school or other partners could support their family.

Respondents spoke to the value of being able to learn in-depth information about a student's background to better understand the behavior or situation as a neutral actor. Facilitators noted that this process enabled them to build rapport with students and listen to their explanation of the behavior or incident, which was helpful in moving forward with the process. Other respondents noted that the preconference "worked" because it was just two people talking, so the setting was more comfortable, open, and supportive. Preconferences were also used to help assess the larger challenges or needs of the student and family (e.g., domestic abuse, drug addiction, or housing) and to set up connections with the appropriate social service providers. Preconferences were seen as important to giving a platform to allow a student's voice to be heard, which is one of the key goals of the restorative approach.

Respondents emphasized that they learned important details about the student's behavior or actions through the preconference. Preconferences also allowed facilitators to explain all the details and tenets of the restorative practices process with participants, including highlighting the importance

of taking responsibility for actions and being accountable. There was also a focus on repairing harm and making things right with the victim, school staff, or the community.

Implementing the Conferences

Table 2 shows the cases that were referred to conference and that resulted in a conference in the 2015–16 school year at each school. Although there was variation across schools, in total, half the cases referred to conferences were for chronic disruptive misbehavior (e.g., disrupting the classroom, cussing, or throwing papers; 34 percent of cases) or truancy (16 percent of cases). Interestingly, referred chronic disruption cases were less likely to result in a conference (55 percent) compared with other cases (approximately 80 percent).

There were a variety of other types of incidents that were sent to conference, including students leaving school or cutting class, possession of a weapon or drugs, cyberbullying, fights, theft, alarm pulls, plagiarism, and pushing teachers. A major challenge for obtaining referrals to conferences for more serious cases concerns a common belief that RJ approaches lack consequences for misbehavior. Addressing this challenge has required repeated, consistent messaging about how accountability and repairing harms are central to the RJ approach.

Given the many different parties involved in conferences and the sensitive and sometimes challenging content of these meetings, there were notable challenges faced throughout the first year of implementation. However, there were also rich examples of the process working as intended. The following section discusses the challenges and successes that came out of conference work in the first implementation year.

TABLE 2

Referrals and Conferences during the 2015–16 School Year

	Referrals to Conference		Conferences Held		Percentage of referrals that went to conference
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	
Middle School 1	**40**	**100%**	**30**	**100%**	**75%**
Truancy cases	1	3%	0	0%	0%
Chronic disruption cases	19	48%	13	43%	68%
All other cases	20	50%	17	57%	85%
Middle School 2	**16**	**100%**	**13**	**100%**	**81%**
Truancy cases	10	63%	9	69%	90%
Chronic disruption cases	6	38%	4	31%	67%
All other cases	0	0%	0	0%	NA
High School 1	**51**	**100%**	**29**	**100%**	**57%**
Truancy cases	2	4%	2	7%	100%
Chronic disruption cases	20	39%	6	21%	30%
All other cases	29	57%	21	72%	72%
High School 2	**17**	**100%**	**14**	**100%**	**82%**
Truancy cases	10	59%	9	64%	90%
Chronic disruption cases	5	29%	3	21%	60%
All other cases	2	12%	2	14%	100%
High School 3	**25**	**100%**	**20**	**100%**	**80%**
Truancy cases	3	12%	1	5%	33%
Chronic disruption cases	1	4%	1	5%	100%
All other cases	21	84%	18	90%	86%
High School 4	**9**	**100%**	**9**	**100%**	**100%**
Truancy cases	0	0%	0	0%	NA
Chronic disruption cases	2	22%	2	22%	100%
All other cases	7	78%	7	78%	100%
All Schools	**158**	**100%**	**115**	**100%**	**73%**
Truancy cases	26	16%	21	18%	81%
Chronic disruption cases	53	34%	29	25%	55%
All other cases	79	50%	65	57%	82%

Common Challenges with Conferences

Respondents noted that the most difficult conferences were those that involved difficult family relationships or very sensitive information. For example, in some cases, there were deeper issues like separation, disconnection, or parent's lack of control of students. In these cases, emotions often ran high and there were deeper family dynamics to work through, which sometimes led to challenges connecting the issues back to the incident at hand to successfully reach a resolution.

Another challenge encountered in conferences was when students shared some sensitive information in preconference (e.g., drug or alcohol use, or sexual experience) that their parent or guardian did not know about. Usually this piece of information was crucial to understanding the

student's background or the incident itself. Facilitators who encountered this challenge often worked with students during the preconference to help them feel more comfortable in a supportive environment like conferences.

While staff had challenges connecting with parents to set up conferences, they also had challenges that arose during the conferences. Respondents noted that in some conferences, parents or guardians spoke over their children and did not adhere to the rules of allowing everyone an opportunity to talk. In other cases, parents would not accept that their child did anything wrong, or they were defiant about the school's authority and told their child not to listen to the assistant principal or principal.

Some respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring that all conference participants are attentive (without using cell phones or other distractions) and that participants remain in the conference for the whole time, rather than coming and going.

Key Elements of Successful Conferences

In discussing the features of successful conferences, respondents highlighted the importance of identifying and addressing deeper causes of the problem, helping students understand the impact of their actions, setting up meaningful restitution that helped benefit the student and school or wider community, and developing or rejuvenating a supportive relationship.

Focusing on the support element, respondents mentioned cases in which families were confronting deeper issues (e.g., housing or employment) that were relatively unknown but came out during the conference process. In these cases, families were often referred to the Family Care Community Partnership, including Family Service of Rhode Island, which partners with a number of agencies to connect families with a wide variety of help, including case management and social service benefits. At other times, learning about the family context and issues uncovered problems that were easier to address, such as Internet connectivity issues.

Respondents emphasized cases in which there was a breakthrough in helping students understand the impact of their actions. For example, in a few cases, offending students were able to hear firsthand the impact of their actions on the victims who participated in their conference. In other scenarios, students heard from school staff, parents, or other community members about how their actions directly affected a person or the community in a negative way. Respondents noted the power of this experience, as students typically do not have the opportunity to understand the impact of their actions and confront those affected under a traditional discipline approach.

Respondents highlighted that successful conferences also helped students develop or rejuvenate new supportive relationships. In some instances, this included improving the relationship between parent and child. Others noted that the process provided the student a relationship with the facilitator or a school staff member with whom they felt comfortable working and meeting. Some respondents also noted the benefit of the participation and attendance of multiple school actors at conferences.

Postconference Follow-Up

An important aspect of successful conferences that was highlighted by respondents concerned restitution work done by students that benefitted them and the school community. For example, a couple of cases involved students developing a presentation about a specific behavior (e.g., bullying or vandalism) and the harm it causes. Students then gave these presentations to younger students at their school or other schools to teach them the lessons learned from their specific experiences. Assessing and defining what elements of a restorative agreement are most and least successful will be important for the project as it gains experience over time.

It was a challenge for facilitators if any participants (student, school, or parent) failed to play their role in completing the restorative agreement. It was important that the restorative agreement was taken seriously and that everyone involved acknowledged the restorative agreement as an accountability framework to enable the student involved to improve his or her actions and repair harm. It was also essential that there was a standardized process to track and monitor restorative agreements to communicate student progress to all parties involved. Some respondents particularly noted the importance of following up with teachers after the conference.

A broader issue that respondents discussed was the challenge of developing a shared understanding of how restorative justice played into the overall approach of accountability and consequences and how success was measured. Many felt that they did not have a clear understanding of what exactly counted as a successful conference. Several different success metrics were suggested by respondents, including improved behavior, attendance, and academic performance. Others discussed successful completion of the restorative agreement, while others focused on building supportive relationships or understanding how to better deal with trauma, aggression, or communication. Respondents felt that the overall lack of understanding of the key goals and how the restorative approach fits into the accountability framework hindered successful implementation.

4. Conclusion

During the first year of implementation, schools and YRP staff made important strides in integrating restorative practices at participating schools and in implementing FG conferencing. Staff members learned much about what was working and what could be improved to enhance the FG conferencing process and increase communication and coordination between key actors.

The Youth Restoration Project and schools have already adapted parts of their approach in an effort to continuously improve the quality of the implementation. For example, YRP adjusted its model to generally have two facilitators in nearly all FG conferences to strengthen facilitation and improve consistency of facilitation. YRP also continued to build relationships with outside community partners (e.g., police offices, the criminal justice system, and community organizations focused on service). And schools are now doing more to help with the initial outreach to families about FG conferences and to establish relationships between families and conference facilitators.

In its second year of implementation, the project will continue to integrate restorative practices into the schools' general approach to discipline. It will also continue to clarify the roles of the conference facilitators within the schools' continuum of responses, standardize which types of cases should be referred to FG conference, and expand the number of conferences.

Notes

1. Although hired by YRP, facilitators are employees of Family Service of Rhode Island.

2. City-Data on Central Falls, Rhode Island. http://www.city-data.com/city/Central-Falls-Rhode-Island.html.

3. Infoworks!: Rhode Island Education Data Reporting on Central Falls District. Retrieved from: http://infoworks.ride.ri.gov/district/central-falls

4. See Robert Rettmann and Patrice Vossekuil, "Enhancing Respectfulness through Restorative Practices," CPI, April 2012, http://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/April-2012/Enhancing-Respectfulness-Through-Restorative-Pract.

5. The length of shadowing for conferences depended on when staff were hired and the overall number of conferences happening at the schools.

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