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Winter 2014

Socializing Schools Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through Restorative Justice

Thalia Gonzalez, *Occidental College*



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Socializing Schools

Addressing Racial Disparities in Discipline Through Restorative Justice

Thalia González

Restorative justice as an approach to improving the school learning environment and student behavior is based on three core principles: repairing harm, involving stakeholders, and transforming community relationships (Macready, 2009; Morrison, 2003; Morrison, 2007; Zehr, 2003). Since the first documented use of restorative justice in schools, its advocates have promoted it as an alternative to zero-tolerance and punitive exclusionary discipline. As interviews with administrators, teachers, parents, students, and school resource officers in the Denver Public Schools have revealed, the impact of restorative practices is not simply an academic idea but a practice for transforming the community:

Restorative justice serves our classroom because students are no longer alienated by the discipline process, but rather affirmed in their feelings and coached on how to act on those feelings in a constructive way. Students are taught how to behave, not punished for breaking rules they never learned. *2nd/3rd Grade Math/Science Teacher, CASA*

In recent years, diverse models of restorative justice have been implemented in schools across the United States to address increasing concerns about the significant negative impact of

exclusionary discipline, particularly for African American and Latino students (Skiba et al., 2011). Research showing that punitive discipline and zero-tolerance policies have resulted in a significant increase in suspensions and expulsions for all students has also documented the alarmingly disproportionate rates at which African American and Latino students experience discipline (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). Such experiences have far-reaching negative implications, from academic underperformance to increased risk of antisocial behavior and entry into the school-to-prison pipeline.

International studies of restorative justice practices in schools provide significant evidence of its positive outcomes for students, teachers, parents, and community members (Morrison, 2007). No similar study has been conducted in the United States, until now. This longitudinal study on the impact of restorative justice in Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the first conducted in an urban school district in the United States. This multiyear examination of the implementation of school-based restorative justice practices across several school sites is based on an unusually rich combination of empirical and qualitative data allowing for comprehensive analysis.

The findings presented in this chapter are based on a case study analysis of DPS conducted from 2008 to 2013, and on data collected by DPS from 2006 to 2013. Data are drawn from observations, open-ended interviews, and secondary analyses of empirical discipline data from DPS at both the district and school levels. The findings provide educational policymakers with five key considerations. First, the systemic implementation of restorative justice at the school and district levels, coupled with the reform of discipline policies, can play a key role in addressing disproportionality in discipline outcomes. Second, the positive impact of restorative practices not only addresses disproportionate discipline but also can be correlated with increased academic achievement. Third, the implementation of restorative practices should be aligned with

clear short-, medium-, and long-term goals, beginning with a small pilot phase and transitioning to widespread adoption. Fourth, the implementation of restorative practices will be different in every district, as it is not simply about adding another program to a teacher's classroom or disciplinarian's protocols but about institutionalizing practices that facilitate microinstitutional changes that are responsive to the needs of individuals and communities. Fifth, the most effective approach to implementing restorative practices is a comprehensive continuum model that can have transformative effects within an individual school community and also be part of districtwide implementation.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS

The broad aim of restorative justice is to develop educational policies and practices that are more responsive and restorative to the needs and concerns of the school community (Morrison, 2007). Restorative justice models contribute to the goal of education by emphasizing accountability, restitution, and restoration of a school community. Restorative justice values a deliberative process because it facilitates mutual understanding, problem solving, and expressions of remorse, compassion, apology, and forgiveness, which might lead to reparative agreements and promote feelings of respect, peace, and satisfaction. As qualitative data have revealed, these feelings contribute to the social capital of a school community and thus should be viewed as positive outcomes of the practice:

Restorative justice has been a powerful practice to use because it aligns with not only my beliefs as a teacher, but my hopes for the future of my students. . . . Working with my students in a restorative way means [producing] a generation of students who are productive

members of my community and society and not students who become community members of the prison system. *3rd/4th Grade Intervention Teacher, CASA*

The underlying assumption of restorative justice is that students who commit delinquent or offensive acts are breaching the social contract between them and the school community. That social contract cannot be restored if the breaching party is absent—that is, if the school’s first and most frequent response is to ban the offender from the community. The inclusive community-based framework of restorative justice lies in sharp contrast to exclusionary discipline policies. As it has no restorative component, it is not surprising that disciplinary exclusion fails to correct student misbehavior and often leads to increased student suspensions, poor academic achievement, a loss of reputation among peers, social isolation, psychological problems, and ultimately, juvenile delinquency (Skiba et al., 2011). Restorative practices emphasize the importance of relationships, which is also at the heart of several other promising interventions for reducing the discipline gap.

Restorative justice is often perceived as a particular way for a school community to respond to a student who has caused damage or harm to a person or property. As the DPS case study illustrates, the practice of restorative justice in schools can be much more. In the most effective schools, the integration of a continuum model aims not only to restore harms to the community but also to build social capital, improve academic performance, and promote a safer school environment. A continuum model entails the incorporation of diverse practices, ranging from brief informal teacher–student exchanges to formal conferences to address misbehavior and resulting consequences. This model provides educators with a more comprehensive set of tools to address the wide range of issues and offenses schools regularly face. In DPS, the continuum model, which includes frequent proactive restorative exchanges, affective statements, questions,

informal conferences, large group circles, and conferences, has been found to have the greatest impact.

Other studies of restorative justice also suggest that a comprehensive continuum model is likely to be highly effective, as it is designed to increase student engagement and transform the entire school environment (Morrison, 2007; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Wachtel, 2001). Although this study was not designed to compare the outcomes of different models of restorative justice, the qualitative analysis does suggest that greatest benefits are achieved when schools employ the practices they find to have the greatest impact.

EXAMINING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

This study provides a descriptive analysis of the integration and implementation of school-based restorative justice practices in Denver Public Schools since 2003. Empirical data used in this study include data collected by DPS beginning in 2003. In 2006, DPS administered surveys and questionnaires and conducted interviews with DPS employees who were engaged in the pilot implementation of restorative justice. In 2009 I began conducting qualitative interviews at North High School (NHS), George Washington High School, Montbello High School, and in 2011, Cole Arts and Sciences Academy (CASA). Interview subjects included students, teachers, staff members, community members, administrators, and DPS restorative justice practitioners. Observations of restorative mediations conferences and circles occurred from 2009 to 2013. Data also were drawn from the observations of participants in more than 1,300 restorative justice cases, the development and practice of training restorative justice coordinators in DPS, and the implementation of discipline systems oriented to comprehensive restorative justice at NHS and CASA.

As findings in Table 10.1, Figure 10.1, and Figure 10.2 indicate, between 2006 and 2013 DPS reduced the district’s overall suspension rate from 10.58% to 5.63%, as well as the suspension rates for each subgroup. Although racial disparities in the district still must be addressed, suspension rates for African Americans fell 7.2% during this period, the largest reduction in absolute terms, which contributed to the narrowing of the racial discipline gap depicted most clearly in Figure 10.2. Most notable is that the African American/White gap decreased by almost 4 percentage points, from nearly a 12-point gap in 2006 to just over an 8-point gap in 2013. Both Latinos and Whites saw reductions in their rates, whereas the Latino/White gap also decreased.

Table 10.1. Total Suspensions, Enrollment, and Suspension Rates by Race (2006-2013)

Year	Total Unduplicated Suspensions	Enrollment	DPS Suspension Rate	African American Suspension Rate	Latino Suspension Rate	White Suspension Rate
2006–2007	7,090	66,960	10.58%	17.61%	10.18%	5.88%
2007–2008	6,739	67,324	10%	16.46%	10.16%	4.62%
2008–2009	6,432	72,005	8.93%	14.79%	8.81%	3.78%
2009–2010	5,944	76,090	7.81%	15.20%	8.68%	2.94%
2010–2011	5,969	78,354	7.62%	14.90%	7.35%	2.95%
2011–2012	5,515	81,392	6.78%	12.70%	5.90%	2.83%
2012–2013	4,751	84,424	5.63%	10.42%	4.74%	2.28%

Figure 10.1. Suspension Rates by Race (2006-2013)

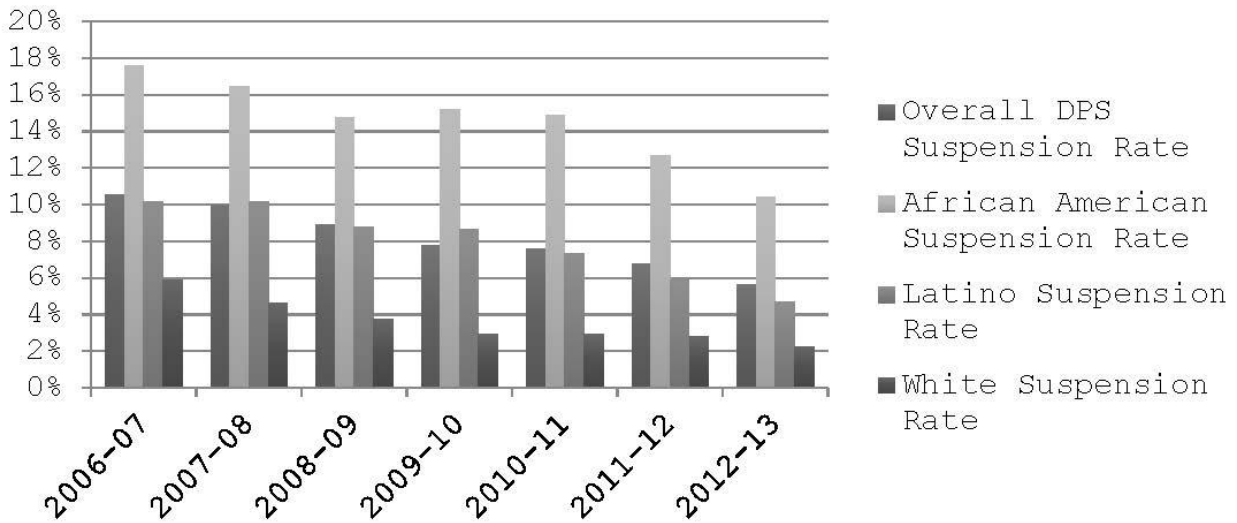
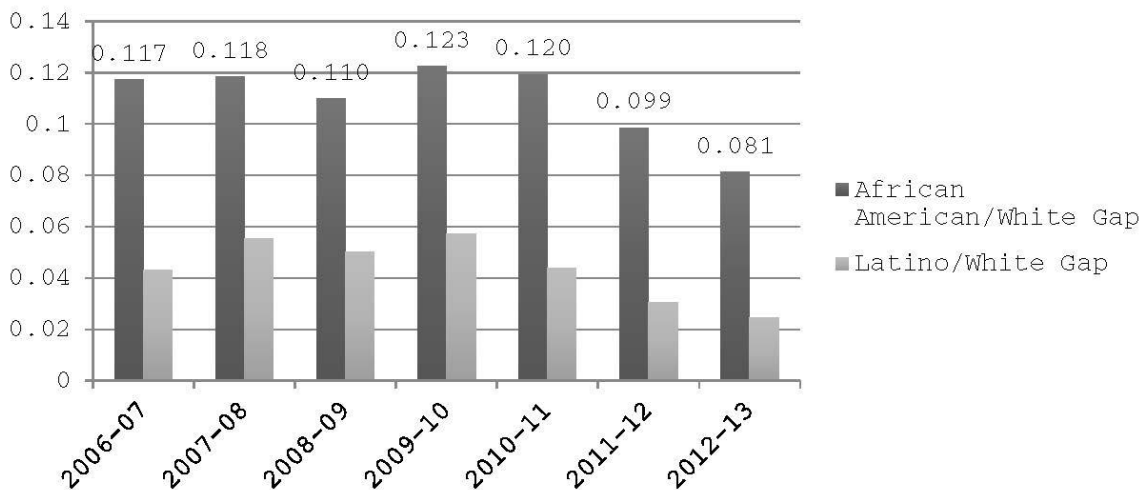


Figure 10.2. Racial Gap in Suspension Rates (2006-2013)



The impact of restorative justice was especially significant at some schools. At CASA, suspension rates for all African American students decreased 14 points, from 16.89% in 2011–2012 to 2.86% in 2012–2013, after schoolwide implementation of restorative practices. At Abraham Lincoln High School (ALHS), the suspension rate for African American male students in 2006–2007 was 24.4%; by 2009–2010 it had decreased 18 points, to 6.25%. The use of restorative practices also affected the suspension rates for Latino male students at ALHS, which decreased over 5 points during those years, from 11.67% to 6.38%. At NHS, the overall

suspension rate, which was 14.12% in 2006, fell over 8 points by 2012–2103, to 5.91%. The suspension rate for African American male students at NHS fell almost 15 points during the same period, from 19.35% to 4.55%.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE IN DENVER’S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The implementation of restorative practices in DPS began as an intervention response to the rapid rise in suspensions and expulsions; from 2001 to 2005, the number of out-of-school suspensions (OSS) rose from 9,846 to 13,487. Implementation of restorative practices began in 2003 with a single-year pilot project at Cole Middle School (CMS). In 2006, DPS embarked on a multischool project, targeting schools with the highest rates of racial disproportionality in discipline. In late 2007, DPS established district-level processes to support practices developed at the early school sites to facilitate more effective implementation in additional schools. In 2009, DPS reoriented restorative justice from a model of intervention to one of prevention. DPS now regards restorative justice as a districtwide practice that promotes positive change in the school culture at all levels.

Since 2006, DPS has adopted both bottom-up and top-down strategies that provide key models for urban school policymakers. At the district level, restorative justice has benefited from having continued central office support. At the individual school level, restorative justice has benefited from having dedicated principals, deans, school resource officers, teachers, and parents who are committed to alternative responses to misbehavior and conflict. Furthermore, the implementation of restorative justice in Denver could not have occurred without a sustained partnership with the community-based organization, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos. Padres y Jóvenes Unidos’s campaigns for racial justice and educational equity have created accountability for DPS

(González, 2011). Further, Padres y Jóvenes Unidos has provided significant input into the development of effective and culturally responsive discipline models.

After 10 years of employing restorative approaches and practices, the key lesson DPS learned is that districts must approach implementation through a model that can be adapted to individual communities and contexts. As the DPS experience illustrates, restorative justice is not a “one-size fits all” process and thus should be implemented as part of a comprehensive multilevel response to behavior problems and conflict. As the data suggest, by adopting a continuum model, DPS was able to reduce racial disparities in school discipline every year for each racial group, even in the earliest stages of implementation. Moreover, schools using restorative justice practices often saw a positive impact on school safety. For example, from 2006 to 2008, NHS averaged more than 50 fights per year; by 2010 that number had declined to 10 or 12. Other schools, as discussed below, experienced significant academic gains as they implemented restorative practices.

2003–2004: Cole Middle School Restorative Justice Pilot

In spring 2003, DPS adopted a 1-year pilot project at Cole Middle School. The CMS pilot was a community-based restorative justice initiative implemented by VORP of Metro Denver and funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. The selection of the school was simple: CMS was notorious for having the largest number of suspensions, tickets, and arrests in the district. As a VORP of Metro Denver community organizer noted, “[Cole] was stereotyped as a ‘gang factory’ where teachers would see students fighting in the hall and close their door instead of intervening.”

Models of practice at CMS included both victim offender mediation and large group circles. Victim offender mediation required responsible and affected parties to sit together and work

through an issue to repair the negative effects of a behavior, hold the responsible party accountable, and empower victims to advocate for their needs. Large group circles at CMS were used to address the concerns of several conflicting parties or situations in which many individuals and parties shared responsibility.

Data reported by VORP of Metro Denver indicate that, in spring 2003, 11 of 14 cases of fighting were referred to restorative intervention, and restorative agreements were reached in each instance. Given these successes and the positive impact on school culture, restorative justice was integrated into the CMS discipline protocols in fall 2004 and used as an alternative to suspensions and police citations in specific cases. In December 2004, VORP of Metro Denver reported that 95 students were referred to restorative justice in lieu of suspensions; 84% of these students signed restorative agreements for conflicts ranging from “trash talk” to physical altercations. By the end of the pilot, police citations had declined by 86% and suspensions by over 40%. VORP reported that more than 200 students had been referred to restorative justice and more than 80 agreements were signed and honored. In spring 2004, the school was awarded the DPS Outstanding Safe School Award.

While the CMS project was a 1-year pilot, the results provided DPS administrators in the Office of Prevention and Intervention Initiatives (OPII) the opportunity to seek support from the Colorado Department of Education to begin a multiyear implementation of restorative justice.

2006–2009: Development of Multischool Restorative Practices

In 2006, DPS began whole-school implementation of restorative justice programs at North High School and its three feeder middle schools: Skinner Middle School, Horace Mann Middle School, and Lake Middle School. These schools represented 10% of the DPS secondary school students (2,599). Like CMS, all four schools were identified as high need, as they had some of

the district's highest number of suspensions, tickets, and arrests. In 2007, implementation was expanded to include Abraham Lincoln High School, Rishel Middle School, and Kunsmiller Middle School.

Data from each school suggested positive disproportionality outcomes. For example, all four of the initial pilot schools showed a consistent decrease in expulsions, from 23 in 2005–2006 to 6 in 2007–2008 (Baker, 2008). In 2008–2009, 1,235 students were referred to the restorative justice program, and a total of 223 cases were resolved without out-of school suspension (Baker, 2009). Eleven additional cases resulted in reduced suspension time (Baker, 2009). As Table 12.1 indicates, overall suspensions declined by 5,400 during this period.

During this time, OPII refined the restorative justice models and developed short- and long-term strategies for districtwide implementation. Adopting a new approach to implementation, OPII hired full-time restorative justice coordinators in each new pilot school. Consistent with prior research findings, OPII believed that developing close relationships among the restorative justice coordinator, school resource officer, teachers, and administrators was essential to implementation success. As the qualitative analysis has revealed, this approach was critical to the positive transition from one-dimensional models of practice to a comprehensive continuum model, including formal and informal restorative practices.

Consistent with a continuum approach, models of practice at each school varied. At NHS, for example, restorative dialogues, preventative classroom circles, mediations, conferences, group conferences, and student-led circles were all used in a continuum of practice. ALHS focused on more traditional student mediation to address student conflicts, both before and after incidents. SMS adopted a model similar to NHS but limited the use of restorative practices to certain offenses specifically defined within the discipline matrix. Though each approach varied, all were

consistent in adopting a restorative approach and promoting whole-school implementation. Although different practices were implemented, focusing on each school community's unique needs, three core practices emerged: restorative justice dialogues, restorative conferencing, and restorative circles. The use of each restorative practice aligned with the specific issue and its impact on individuals and the school community.

In DPS, a restorative dialogue is a one-on-one conversation between two members of the school community, such as a teacher and a student, guided by restorative justice questions. Such interventions are used when the student behavior correlates with the first step of the discipline ladder. For example, restorative mediations are used when both parties bear equal responsibility for an incident (e.g., a fight). A restorative conference occurs when a third party, such as a restorative justice coordinator, facilitates a conference between two parties. The conference is structured to allow facilitated dialogue, in which the parties take turns answering basic restorative questions until an agreement is reached.

Restorative conferences are similar to dialogues but occur when responsibility for an incident is shared unequally between parties, such as bullying. During a restorative conference, the third-party facilitator works to correct an imbalance of power between the parties and create a structure to protect the victim. Restorative circles, defined as group conferences in other settings, are used for incidents involving multiple parties. Restorative circles are implemented in a similar manner to restorative conferences in that each party takes turns answering basic restorative questions. In contrast to a two-party restorative conference, participants are arranged in nonadversarial positions and answer questions in the order in which they are sitting. In DPS, restorative circles also include members of the school community who were indirectly affected by an incident. Restorative circles are most commonly used in classrooms to support learning

outcomes, set boundaries, and develop positive relationships. As such, their use is directly linked to managing curriculum, pedagogy, and behavior. The following narrative captures the transformative nature of restorative practice:

In 2011, several 9th-grade football players became involved in throwing each other into dumpsters at the end of the day. At some point, they decided to begin to intimidate and grab other students who were not willing participants, and throw them in. These students felt harassed and intimidated by this process. After their parents found out this was happening, they called the school, irate about their children's experience. Instead of responding in a punitive manner, the school discipline team decided to begin with a restorative circle involving all the students. The restorative justice coordinator chose a circle so that a larger community could be involved with the discipline process. The circle included football players who had thrown other students in the dumpster, football players not involved but aware of the actions of their teammates, students who were thrown in the dumpsters, the school dean (disciplinarian), a guidance counselor, the school social worker, the school resource officer, and the principal. During the circle, participants used restorative justice to guide their dialogue. They talked about what happened, how it affected the students who were thrown in the dumpster against their will, the larger school community, their parents, school personnel, and the reputation of the football team. The students and adults worked together to build empathy and understand the full impact of such adolescent behavior. When it came time to address accountability, the football players owned up to what they had done and how it could have been perceived as bullying or harmful to other students. The nonparticipating football players expressed their disappointment in being bystanders and their failure to show leadership in what they knew were poor choices. The school personnel

took responsibility for the lack of supervision and their failure to educate the students about the potential dangers of unwanted physical behavior. When asked how to fix the situation, the football players volunteered to miss the homecoming game to demonstrate how seriously they took their behavior. Several also volunteered to speak at a class meeting about their behavior, apologize to the school community, apologize to the individual students, and make it clear that this behavior would not happen again.

This narrative exemplifies the implementation experience in DPS. Although the circle required participants to meet for only about 45 minutes, the impact on the school community lasted beyond 2011. In fact, the school principal noted, “If we had not done restorative justice, there would have been more incidents this year. By making a public commitment to everyone in the circle, these students took it seriously and felt accountable to more than just a small group of adults who punished them.” Furthermore, had the school employed a retributive approach to discipline the offending students, who were predominately Latino and African American male students, they would have faced OSS for 3 to 5 days and potential police citations. Moreover, as qualitative analysis has revealed, these students would have been less likely to accept responsibility for their actions or to engage in activities to promote a safer school community. By using restorative justice, school officials were able to foster the development of healthy, meaningful, and safe peer-to-peer relationships.

In addition to developing sustained restorative practices in the pilot schools, the OPII began to revise the DPS discipline policy to formally incorporate restorative principles into all discipline processes. The OPII recognized that, without a formal districtwide shift from retributive practices, implementing a sustained restorative justice program would be challenging. The process of revising the discipline policy was key to the successful implementation of

restorative justice, from the early pilot stages to becoming a normalized disciplinary practice in DPS.

2007–2013: District-Wide Expansion of Restorative Practices and Policies

Several interconnected occurrences supported the eventual transformation of restorative justice in DPS from an isolated program to a districtwide philosophical and values-based approach and practice. These included the 2008 discipline policy reform, the creation of a practitioner-based restorative justice training to support implementation in additional schools, increased community accountability, reorganization of and increased support from the central district office, a districtwide focus on disproportionality and equity, and the 2013 revised Intergovernmental Agreement between the Denver Public Schools and the Denver Police Department. Furthermore, the OPII developed new structures for guaranteeing consistency and transparency in data collection to document student behavior and the restorative practices used.

The 2008 revisions to the DPS discipline policy included several key changes. The policy explicitly sanctioned restorative justice as an intervention strategy focused on the “opportunity to learn from their [students’] mistakes, and re-engage the student in learning.” In fact, the policy identifies the use of restorative justice interventions as “problem solving interventions done ‘with’ the offender, in contrast to different administrative interventions all involving some degree of removal, done ‘to’ the offender” (Policy JK-R, 2008). Moreover, the policy states that disciplinary practices in DPS will “address the needs of the student who engaged in the misconduct, the needs of those who were affected by the misconduct, and the needs of the overall school community.”

The policy locates these restorative justice efforts within the context of addressing disproportionality:

Efforts shall be made to eliminate any racial disparities in school discipline. Staff members are specifically charged with monitoring the impact of their actions on students from racial and ethnic groups or other protected classes that have historically been over-represented among those students who are suspended, expelled, or referred to law enforcement (Policy JK-R, 2008).

The policy also states, “schools should minimize the use of out-of-school suspensions, recommendations for expulsion, and referrals to law enforcement, to the extent practicable while remaining consistent with state statute, local ordinances, and mandatory reporting laws.” As discussed above, restorative justice practices at NHS were often used in lieu of suspensions or in conjunction with reduced suspension time. Moreover, OSS were limited under the revised policy to be consistent with restorative practice, and if “previous interventions have not been successful, the principal or principal’s designee may consider the use of an in-school suspension of 1-3 days or a one-day out-of-school suspension” (Policy JK-R, 2007).

By grounding disciplinary practices within a restorative rather than a retributive framework, schools have been able to impact disproportionality and foster positive school culture more effectively. For example, before the 2008 revisions, OSS was assigned for 3 to 5 days following a severe misbehavior, such as a fight. Under the revised policy, schools opted to assign shorter OSS in conjunction with employing restorative practices when students reentered school. Consider NHS, where the average OSS decreased from 3 days to less than 1 day beginning in 2006. Interviews at NHS revealed that this practice also changed the character of suspension. Under the prior policy, the tone when the student returned to the community was adversarial. By using a more restorative approach, students were prepared on their return to begin a process to resolve the issue at hand.

As the qualitative data reflect, this process ultimately allowed the school to change its culture and its approach to discipline, and to heal staff–student relationships. Administrators, teachers, and students at NHS have all attributed the change in culture to the use of restorative practices to create accountability and promote meaningful relationships. Although quantitative data cannot capture the interpersonal experiences, suspension rates declined at NHS from 14.12% to 5.91% by 2012–2013.

In 2009, DPS also began revising the teacher-evaluation systems, increasing accountability for punitive disciplinary responses, and implementing leadership development. In addition to these internal reforms, the OPII began a comprehensive districtwide training focused on implementation of individualized restorative justice practices under the revised discipline policy. As interviews with teachers revealed, there was a high demand for restorative justice trainings specifically for teachers to promote positive academic experiences and behaviors. The trainings were developed by restorative justice coordinators and emphasized an individualized approach to restorative practices for school communities.

In 2009, additional trainings were offered two to three times a year and were attended by school disciplinarians, administrators, and mental health professionals. By 2011, an average of 500 people, including teachers, parents, and students, attended monthly restorative justice trainings. DPS continues to experiment with best practices and ways to offer this training to deepen and improve restorative justice practices. In 2012–2013, 75% of Denver schools reported having at least one person trained in restorative justice facilitation and that they were using restorative justice practices to address discipline in their school.

In 2011, DPS reorganized the OPII into the Department of Mental Health and Assessment in Student Services. This reorganization led to key changes, which further developed districtwide

restorative justice practices. Most important, restorative justice implementation shifted from the intervention and prevention model of individual school practitioner to a team of mental health support specialists engaged in whole-school implementation. The goal of the teams is to create equitable disciplinary outcomes through a range of practices. At the center of all of these practices are restorative principles.

In addition to the internal changes supporting this holistic implementation, in 2013 the Denver Police Department and DPS reached an agreement that clarified the role of school resource officers (Intergovernmental Agreement, 2013). The agreement refines and limits the role of the school resource officers and specifically delineates DPS's commitment to restorative justice rather than punitive discipline. The agreement also establishes increased due process protections for students and parents, requires school resource officers to meet regularly with community groups, and requires school resource officers be trained in restorative justice, child and adolescent development, and conflict de-escalation.

As DPS continues to implement restorative justice in its schools, it is clear that the use of restorative approaches should not be viewed as a "program." Instead, the whole-district implementation reflects a paradigm shift that views restorative justice as another tool to effectively educate students. DPS thus considers conflict or misconduct not as an opportunity to suspend or expel but to teach and learn by promoting connections and positive communities. One NHS teacher's reflection captures this idea:

When other teachers ask me why I use restorative justice with my students, my answer is simple. It changes how my students learn. . . . It used to be that we would try to push conflict outside the classroom door by suspending or removing a student in some way, but that does

not resolve the conflict, it just makes it worse when that same student walks back through your door.

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS AS A MODEL FOR IMPLEMENTING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

Many positive outcomes have been realized in Denver, but the implementation of restorative justice in the district is far from over. As it moves forward, the long-term DPS vision focuses not only on sustainability but on striving for greater equity in its educational and disciplinary practices, and on developing deeper relationships within the community. In this context, DPS is committed to continued collaboration with diverse stakeholders to develop effective top-down and bottom-up strategies to address racial disproportionality, build social capital, promote school engagement, and improve academic performance.

The experience in Denver provides valuable insights for policymakers seeking to implement restorative justice as an alternative to racially disproportionate disciplinary practices. Schools seeking to address disproportionality in discipline through restorative justice should envision a 4- to 6-year implementation plan that focuses on six key areas: (1) establishing specific reasons for implementation and buy-in from key members of the school community; (2) developing a clear institutional vision with short-, medium-, and long-term goals; (3) creating a responsive, effective, and adaptive practice; (4) adopting a districtwide disciplinary policy and discipline practices that integrate restorative justice; (5) developing school-based discipline practices that promote a whole-school approach rather than a program-based model; and (6) investing in a continuous system of growth and professional development for all members of the school community.

Finally, it should be noted that between 2009 and 2013 DPS showed a steady and substantial increase in the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on statewide tests in reading, writing, and math in all grades tested (3–10), with the exception of grade-8 reading. In 2013, the district made overall gains from 2009 of 4 percentage points in reading, 7 points in math, 6 points in writing, and 9 points in science. Furthermore, the average ACT scores in DPS increased from 15.4 to 17.6. On-time graduation rates also increased, from 46.4% (2009) to 51.8% (2010). During the same time, high school dropout rates decreased from 11.1% (2006) to 6.4% (2010). This trend is consistent with other studies showing that, after controlling for poverty and other factors, lower suspending districts had higher test scores. There is no question that, during a period of significantly reducing the use of suspension in DPS, gains were made in academic achievement in all subjects in nearly every grade. These gains might be merely coincidental or the result of changes in other policies, but this academic growth should allay fears that reducing suspensions will create a chaotic and less productive learning environment. Although this study of DPS did not put the hypothesis to the test, it seems plausible that by reducing the discipline gap Denver also reduced the achievement gap.

NOTES

The author would like to recognize Benjamin Cairns for his substantial contributions and collaboration on this project since 2009. Without his commitment to the research, capturing the diverse experiences in Denver would not have been possible.

1. Prior research on restorative practices in DPS provides a more detailed description of the continuum model (González, 2011; González, 2012).

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