

Distance Learning and Restorative Practices:

Supporting Social-Emotional Learning, Positive School Climate, and Academic Achievement

The COVID-19 public health crisis upended all aspects of society overnight, and education was no exception. Students, caregivers, educators, and school staff had to transition from traditional in-person learning to distance learning overnight, with very little time to plan for the change.

Beyond the immediate physical health impacts of COVID-19, the pandemic has made it more difficult to address students' social-emotional and mental health needs. Our ability to maintain strong social cohesion in a remote learning environment will be challenging. Restorative practices and other social-emotional learning strategies can help schools build community and ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn.

Schools provide students with much more than an academic education; they also provide opportunities for students to develop important communication and coping skills. Social-emotional learning and school climate have been recognized as important factors in creating an academic environment that is conducive to learning. There has been a growing recognition that a student's social and emotional well-being is an important part of their academic experience and an important contributor to academic success.



Restorative Practices

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP), restorative practices is a social science that studies how to improve and repair relationships between people and communities. Restorative practices have gained recognition as a strategy that can create a positive school climate, a sense of community that fosters student learning, and supports students' social-emotional learning needs. Restorative practices allows students to proactively build relationships and community through restorative circles and dialogue. Participating in restorative circles can help build trusting relationships between students and with teachers. It also heightens teacher sensitivity to the perspective of students, which is extremely important when students are learning remotely. Improving student-teacher relationships increases the likelihood that students will be more engaged in their learning.

Restorative practices are more important than ever during remote learning. Many districts recognize the need to invest in programs that can genuinely work to dismantle structural racism and support the academic success of all students. As schools transition to distant learning, restorative practices should be prioritized in schools to foster a strong social connection among students and staff. Relationship building circles, inclusive decision making, communication skill building, and affective language school-wide are all strategies that schools can utilize in a distance learning setting.

Disparities in Educational Opportunity

Disparities in the distribution of wealth that have affected educational and health outcomes have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Black and Latinx students are more likely to attend schools that are high in poverty and are

more segregated, therefore concentrating the lack of opportunity. With schools having to move exclusively to distance learning, the “[digital divide](#)” is exacerbating black and Latinx student’s [lack of opportunity](#) (see “Computer & Broad-band Internet” tab) to learn. It is important that as schools plan for distance learning and to resume in-person education, they consider strategies to address the social determinants that contribute to these [disparities](#) to ensure they do not continue to be exacerbated.

Why Should Schools Commit to Implementing Restorative Practices?

Data show a restorative practices program is most effective when school and district administrators work alongside faculty and staff to learn restorative practices and champion the effort.¹

Various studies and surveys have found that restorative practices:

- Improved school climate
- Improved sense of community and safety
- Reduced student suspensions and expulsions²
- Decreased discipline disparities³
- Reduced bullying⁴
- Reduced absenteeism for students and staff

Further, research studies and reports show the importance of improved school climate and social-emotional learning for supporting student well-being. Numerous government and national reports recommend restorative practices to support these goals.⁵

How does Restorative Practices Align with Other School Climate Initiatives?

Restorative practices complements other programs, including SEL (social-emotional learning) and PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports). In fact, many educators find that restorative practices provide practical approaches that help them more fully implement other programs.

When implemented in conjunction with elementary or middle school SEL programs, restorative practices provide a powerful framework for building competencies and sustaining healthy relationships. Restorative practices programs create time, space, and structure for students and adults to recognize, process, and express emotions. Together, restorative practices and SEL improve school climate and culture by increasing prosocial interaction and decreasing physically or emotionally unsafe behavior, offering real-life benefits for students.

Restorative practices also aligns with MTSS (multi-tiered system of support) approaches, such as PBIS. The IIRP instructs educators to use proactive approaches 80 percent of the time (Tier 1) to strengthen relationships and build community before harm has occurred. When used preventatively, restorative responses tend to be needed just 20 percent of the time for addressing harm and holding students accountable. Processes such as circles, impromptu conversations, and formal conferences can be used to respond to minor incidents (Tier 2) as well as more serious ones (Tier 3). This approach can positively impact students with disabilities and other marginalized groups.⁶

Resources

- [San Mateo County Office of Education Restorative Practices Resources & Training Opportunities](#)
- [Get Healthy San Mateo County Restorative Justice Practices](#)
- [Implementing Restorative Justice Practices in San Mateo County: Multi-Tiered System of Support to Improve School Climate and Health](#)
- [International Institute for Restorative Practices \(IIRP\) Guides for Implementation](#)
- [Fix School Discipline: How We Can Fix School Discipline Toolkit](#)