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Restorative Practices and the Transformation at West Philadelphia High School

BY LAURA MIRSKY

West Philadelphia High School has undergone a transformation. It has been on Pennsylvania's "Persistently Dangerous Schools" list for six years, but the implementation of restorative practices and strong leadership, headed by principal Saliyah Cruz, have made a huge difference. The culture and climate of the school have improved significantly, violent and serious incidents have plummeted, and rates of discipline procedures such as suspensions and expulsions have decreased dramatically.

"When I came here [in fall 2007]," said Cruz, "One of the first things I noticed was that there was not a great deal of respect between adults and students. There was a small group of students who were chronically involved in the discipline loop. So obviously the detentions and suspensions weren't communicating a message that kids were receiving, because they were still repeating the same behavior. Adults were getting frustrated and no one was learning anything here."

Since restorative practices implementation, said Cruz, "Students know that if there is an issue or a problem, they'll have an opportunity to share, to have a stake in what happens next. In the classroom it's really about getting to a state where we can all work. It's not about: How much punishment can I heap onto this person? The more the kids understand that, the more they're willing to own what's happened to them."

Cruz first learned about restorative practices in spring 2008 when Dr. Russell Gallagher, then the school's assistant principal, received a mailing from the International Institute for Restorative

Practices (IIRP) about a one-day conference on restorative practices and brought it to her attention. Intrigued, she sent to that conference Gallagher and several other staff members who represented two poles of the discipline spectrum: those who were "heavy-handed" and those who were "amazing in terms of talking things through with students." Cruz figured if they could agree that restorative practices made sense, it might work for "West." All of them returned thrilled about the prospects for restorative practices. The IIRP was contracted to begin training school staff in August 2008.



Marsha Walker and students circle up at West Philadelphia High School

Even before that training, some staff began employing the practices informally. At the one-day conference they had obtained IIRP Restorative Questions Cards (www.iirp.org/books_n_videos_info/restquescards), which include questions used to respond to challenging behavior (e.g., What happened? Who has been affected by what you have done? What do you think you need to do to make things right?), as well as questions used to help those harmed by others' actions (e.g.,

What impact has this incident had on you and others? What do you think needs to be done to make things right?) As they began using these questions in their approach to discipline and conflict, staff and student communication began to improve and discipline problems began to decrease.

At the end of school year 2007-2008 the entire school staff heard a briefing on restorative practices so they could decide whether to attend the August training, which was voluntary. Nearly all staff did attend.

On the first day of school year 2008-2009, many teachers put the desks in their classrooms in circles and began using restorative practices. For the most part, newer, younger staff embraced the practices first, said Cruz.

"Staff were free to implement whatever aspects of the training they wanted," said Neil Geyette, teacher and coordinator of the Urban Studies Academy (for community organizing and planning), one of four of the school's academies. "Every Monday and Friday we do a check-in and check-out circle. We started with easy questions and have geared it up to get kids to open up a little more. The students get along really well. The two circles and the training have helped achieve a more positive climate in my classroom."

A brand-new teacher tried a circle in her classroom following a fight across the street at the Auto Academy because her students were too distracted to concentrate on lessons. The teacher, said Cruz, was "really surprised that the kids had some very specific and mature things to share about what had happened and what

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they thought could be done to restore the climate in the Auto Academy.”

At the next IIRP training that teacher shared her experience with the rest of the staff, and she and some other teachers who had been employing the practices enacted a mock circle. This helped convince staff members who were still skeptical, said Cruz: those who thought that “students aren’t going to want to be open and share; they’re going to be afraid to say things about other students in the classroom, [and that] the child who may have caused a problem is not going to want to sit through hearing what they had done to their peers.” Eventually, said Cruz, “I think the teachers with a lot of experience thought: If a teacher with two months of experience could pull this off, then I can probably pull this off, too.”

Lt. Col. James Cotten, an officer and teacher in the Air Force Junior ROTC who has been at West for 14 years, is sold on restorative practices, saying, “This school has improved 100 percent. “We had numerous fires last year. This year, I don’t think we’ve had one fire. At the end of last year we were still on the list of persistently dangerous schools. This year, based on the number of serious incidents in the school, I know for a fact that we’re going to get off that list.” Added Cotten, “Restorative practices can work in tough urban schools, and it doesn’t get any tougher than West Philadelphia High School.”

Cotten and Cruz talked about a circle, the school’s “first official [restorative] conference,” with two groups of girls, most in Cotten’s ROTC class, who were on the verge of a physical fight. The circle was led by the school’s special education liaison, Patricia Burch, who, besides receiving restorative practices training at West, is also taking classes at the IIRP Graduate School.

Said Cruz, “You could see the girls’ body language: ‘I’m not talking to her.’

‘She better not look at me.’ And I was thinking, this is either going to work, or there’s going to be a huge fight in this room. Ms. Burch asked, ‘Does anyone want to talk about what’s going on here?’ And for a minute you got [body language]: ‘I’m not saying anything.’ ‘Let her do it.’ Then the first girl finally opened up, and she talked about the pain she felt about things that had been said and the sense of betrayal she felt. And the girls just started to talk about all kinds of personal issues. It was amazing to me. Here you are in front of the principal, the assistant principal, your ROTC instructor and the special ed. liaison. And they started to cry and say, ‘I didn’t realize that’s how you felt’ and ‘You hurt me, and I knew that this would hurt you, so that’s why I did it.’ And they walked out of there with acknowledgement of what everyone had done. They went back to being friends and being supportive of one another, and there was never a physical altercation. They didn’t want it to go as far as it had, but they didn’t know how to stop it, and nobody had the words or the courage to back up and say, this is where we are, but I didn’t want it to get to this point.”

Marsha Walker, a veteran science and special education teacher, is also excited about restorative practices. “In September [2008] the principal asked us to start using circles in the classroom to build a family. So I started doing that, and the students like it, and I like it as well. I haven’t had to use it a lot in terms of discipline, because just the [check-in and check-out] circles have worked in my classroom, and I can feel that we are more of a family this year. I can see the difference in my students, and I can also see the difference in my behavior.”

A building committee member of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (the teachers’ union), Walker said she believes that the PFT should encourage and support restorative practices in schools: “We

punish kids but we never really talk to them. I personally have an issue with that as a teacher. Sometimes you need to talk, and that’s what restorative practices gives us. It also helps students to understand that they have to have some accountability.” Walker is a master’s degree candidate at the IIRP Graduate School.

Cruz concluded, “The kids have embraced it maybe even more than the adults, and that’s helped us with the staff who said that the kids weren’t mature enough, can’t handle it, won’t take it seriously and won’t own what’s going on, and we found that that’s not the case. The kids are very perceptive about themselves and about their peers, and if you just give them the opportunity to take responsibility, more often than not, they will.”

What students have to say:

Ashai Peterson: “Before we had circles at our school, there were a lot of fights and problems and riots — just too much conflict.”

Ishea Moon: “Before we had circles, kids felt like they couldn’t share out loud because they were afraid of being picked on or teased. But now, because we do have circles, kids aren’t so afraid. They listen to what one another has to say now.”

Donald Smith: “I like circles because you get to talk about what you’re feeling on the inside; you don’t have to hold it in. You get to talk about stuff you think is wrong, stuff you think is right and stuff you think people should do to help you.”

Aatirah Wilson: “Circles prevent problems because you’re not only sitting down with your enemy, but everybody else that you like and dislike, and you can just tell them how you feel to their face, instead of beating them up. And I like circles because they’re just fun.”

To view the video: *The Transformation of West Philadelphia High School: A Story of Hope*, please go to: www.iirp.org/westphilahigh. 📺