

## The potential of restorative practices to ameliorate discipline gaps: The story of one high school's leadership team

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Mansfield, K.C., Fowler, E., & Rainbolt, S. (2018). The potential of restorative practices to ameliorate discipline gaps: The story of one high school's leadership team. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 54(2), 303-323. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X17751178>

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### Abstract:

The purpose of this “From the Field” article is to share the tentative results of community-engaged research investigating the impact of Restorative Justice Discipline Practices on persistent discipline gaps in terms of race, gender, and special education identification.

**Keywords:** restorative practices | discipline | social justice | student voice | school culture | student-administrator relationships

### Article:

Research from the past two decades shows that exclusionary discipline practices are inequitable. For example, males, African American students, and students with disabilities are suspended at far higher rates than their peers. The likelihood of Black students being suspended is two to three times greater than White students. And students with disabilities are twice as likely to face exclusionary discipline when compared with their peers (Carr, 2012; Crenshaw, Ocen, Nanda, & Carranza, 2015; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Kinsler, 2011; Maag, 2012).

In addition to being inequitably meted, punitive measures are ineffective. Furthermore, school exclusion starts a chain reaction of events that put a student more at risk of juvenile justice system involvement (Fabelo et al., 2011). According to many researchers, exclusionary discipline practices contribute to what is now commonly referred to as the *school-to-prison pipeline* (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). School suspension has been linked to lower achievement, reduced engagement, truancy, risk-taking behaviors, dropping (or being pushed) out, and incarceration (Carr, 2012; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Maag, 2012; Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, despite a lack of research showing positive benefits, and an abundance of research demonstrating negative ramifications, exclusionary practices are on the rise (Carr, 2012) and “being used in increasingly peculiar ways” (Maag, 2012, p. 2094). For example, a May 5, 2017, report from *ABC NEWS* indicated that a school in Connecticut suspended 150 students in one day due to dress code violations, most commonly for wearing hoodies (Melia, 2017). In another instance, an 11-year-old girl was expelled for 6 days for bringing a preschooler-sized

butter knife to cut a peach during lunchtime (Elizalde, 2016). However, exclusionary practices are not only limited to situations mandated by policy but also on the increase when it comes to discretionary offenses (Carr, 2012)—especially for Black girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016).

Maag (2012) and Carr (2012) suggest that school administrators continue to use exclusionary practices because the “get tough approach” on crime (and misbehavior at school) has been so ingrained in our society’s psyche the past two decades. In addition, “there are certain social and political forces that . . . either positively or negatively impact federal and state funds schools receive and the public’s perception of the effectiveness of a given school district” (Maag, 2012, p. 2097). Moreover, sometimes school administrators are ethically conflicted, caught between doing what they believe is best for students and conforming to their supervisors’ expectations (McGee & Mansfield, 2014). Research has shown that principals’ jobs are increasingly fraught with wrestling with this “double mandate” (McGee & Mansfield, 2014, p. 157) and confusion as to what options are available to meet the obligations of both. Add to that, the negative reinforcement that teachers experience each time they send a student to the office:

Teachers typically find a student’s incessant misbehavior to be unpleasant and, consequently, remove the student from the classroom. The teacher’s behavior of removing the student from the classroom has been negatively reinforced because it terminated the unpleasantness of the student’s misbehavior. Therefore, teachers are more likely to continue removing misbehaving students from the classroom in the future. (Maag, 2012, pp. 2096-2097)

As Carr (2012) points out, it is very difficult for adults to change their behavior. They have become accustomed to “the least little infraction resulting in a suspension” (para. 34). “Meanwhile, teachers and administrators may unfairly stereotype minority schoolchildren’s actions based on implicit racism” (para. 23).

During the 2012-2013 school year, the Commonwealth of Virginia reported 137,151 short-term suspensions (10 days or less) and 5,517 long-term suspensions (between 11 and 365 days), and 518 expulsions (at least 365 days). Taken together, 78,941 Virginia students were suspended or expelled in a single year. Moreover, approximately 20% of those suspensions were meted out to elementary school students. Finally, in 2012 Virginia reported the highest rate of school-based arrests and court referrals of any state in the nation (Legal Aid Justice Center, 2016).

Similar trends at the district level have been noted. For example, between 2003 and 2006 the number of school disciplinary infractions in Tenacomakah Regional Public Schools (TRPS) in Central Virginia had increased approximately 8.5%, while student enrollment increased by only 3.5% during that same period. Fast forward to the 2013-2014 school year, 5,402 short-term suspensions were issued to 3,229 students and 107 long-term suspensions were issued to 102 students. Finally, there were 951 juvenile court charges, 40% of which were against children 14 years old or younger (Legal Aid Justice Center, 2016).

Within TRPS, leadership in Algonquin High School (AHS) were troubled by these national, state, and district trends and recognized statistics at their school followed suit. Recognizing the

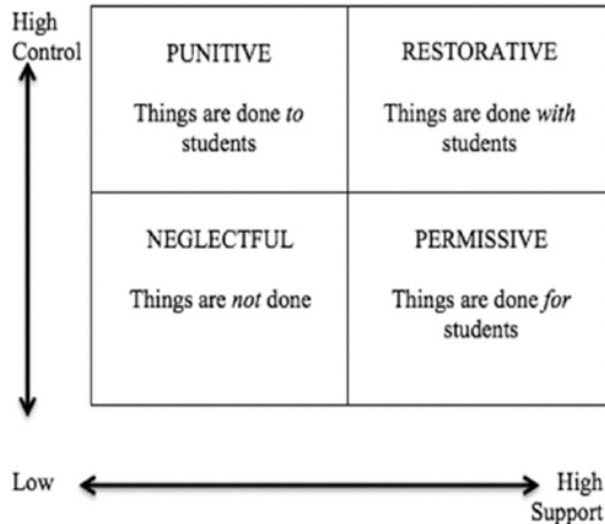
damaging effects of exclusionary practices, especially for students at the intersection of race, gender, and special education status, school administrators began researching alternatives to punitive discipline.

The purpose of this report from the field is to share preliminary results of a community-engaged research project. We share the story of why and how one high school implemented restorative practices (RPs) and how their efforts met with notable measures of success despite continued challenges. First, we share an overview of the literature on RPs and the specific RP model implemented. We then provide some background on the case and share the story of how it was determined that taking a restorative approach to discipline was the best method to begin alleviating discipline gaps. The narrative also includes steps building leaders took to work toward successful implementation of RPs. Then, we report the statistics indicating change over time during the 5-year incremental implementation phase. Finally, we conclude with a short discussion on unanswered questions and future research and a word of encouragement for educational administrators interested in implementing RP at their schools.

### **An Explanation of Restorative Practices and the SaferSanerSchools™ Model**

Simply put, the term *restorative practices* does not have one single definition (Reimer, 2011). Instead, RPs encompass a multitude of positive behavioral support approaches in a school that fosters communication, mutual respect, and understanding between all people (Mirsky, 2011; Morris, 2016). Under this approach, engaging students socially in the school community takes precedent over social control (Morris, 2016; Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). When issues arise, RPs bring educators and students together in the school setting for the purpose of goal-setting and mutual resolution. The resulting approach is solution-focused for the betterment of all involved (Nesbitt & Clarke, 2004). In addition, using restorative approaches to discipline encourages the development of students' communication and leadership skills (Morris, 2016). Thus, RPs can potentially answer the call by scholars featured in *Educational Administration Quarterly* the past 15 years who urge practitioners and researchers to increase levels of student voice and shared leadership to (a) strengthen social justice leadership on the ground and (b) ensure more inclusive approaches to studying life in schools (Bertrand, 2014; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2005; Shields, 1999).

The notion of RPs is predicated on the theory that individuals are less likely to change their behavior when authority figures do things *to* or *for* them (International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], n.d.; Morris, 2016). Kane et al. (2016) characterize approaches to discipline by placing them on a quadrant indicating various emphases between control and support. As can be seen in Figure 1, the first approach is punitive (high control and low support) and the second permissive (low control and high support). Contrast the above approaches with sheer neglect when things are not done at all (low control and low support). Ultimately, RPs aim to provide high support for both students and teachers in a closely structured setting where people in the school community work together (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The control-support discipline quadrant.  
*Note.* Adapted from Kane et al. (2007).

The lack of success garnered by punitive, exclusionary discipline practices imposed on students over more recent decades supports that doing things *to* students who behave poorly does not positively affect social behavior (Morris, 2016). Conversely, positive behavioral changes are more likely to occur in a context where those in authority do things *with* students (Mirsky, 2011; Morris, 2016). Thus, a cornerstone of a restorative setting is centering actions and reactions on understanding and respect between students, administrators, teachers, staff, and families (IIRP, n.d.). The resulting relationships that are established, rather than fear of the institution and its punishments, are believed to be the force that maintains the social order and harmony in a school that fully integrates RPs (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

Though precise strategies for implementing RPs have varied widely both nationally and internationally, as described by Gregory, Clawson, Davis, and Gerewitz (2016), Kane et al. (2007), Macready (2009), McCluskey et al. (2008), Morrison & Vaandering (2012), and Reimer (2011), they commonly share a focus on building understanding, resolving conflict, increasing mutual respect, accepting diversity, committing to fairness and equity, and promoting personal responsibility and accountability for one’s actions (Macready, 2009; Morris, 2016). Some scholars have labeled restorative approaches generally as matriarchal for their appreciation of care, nurture, tolerance, and diversity (Nesbitt & Clarke, 2004), contrasting with patriarchal values that focus on control and dominance (Mansfield, Welton, & Grogan, 2014).

#### SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change™

One structured, comprehensive model encompassing all of the above traits is the *SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change™* program from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania (Mirsky, 2011). This program, which involves a 2-year formal implementation process, holds 11 elements at its core (IIRP, n.d.). These 11 elements can be further divided into those that are *preventative* and those that are *responsive* in nature (Gregory et al., 2016). The program’s fundamentals are represented and defined according to these two categories in Tables 1 and 2 (both based on IIRP, n.d.).

**Table 1. SaferSanerSchools Preventative Elements.**

Level of Action	Element	Description
Tier 1: School-wide	Affective statements	Informal, respectful, personal statements of feelings, and how another’s actions affect a person; humanize the speaker.
	Fair process	Approach to decision making that elicits student’s input when outcomes affect them; Not synonymous with democratic process of voting, but does espouse transparency as to why decisions are made and respect for all opinions.
	Restorative staff community	Models restorative practices (affective statements, circles, fair process, restorative questions, etc.) to attain conflict resolution and to build healthy relationships
	Fundamental hypothesis understandings	Cornerstone of all restorative practices; Necessitates aligning actions with the belief that positive behavioral changes are most likely to occur in a state of high, consistent expectations where authority figures do things with, not for or to others.
Tier 2: Broad-based	Restorative approach with families	Use of other restorative practices in interactions with families aimed at building transparency, respect, and meaningful relationships.
	Proactive circles <sup>1</sup>	Precede incidents and focus on preselected topics; can be conducted with any group that meets regularly; used to build trust and relationships, elicit input from all, and to establish common expectations and sharing. Ideally 80% or more of circles experienced by students.

**Table 2. SaferSanerSchools Responsive Elements.**

Level of Action	Element	Description
Tier 1: School-wide	Restorative questions	Informal questions that allow those affected to be heard by the offender and places the onus for making things right back on the offender.
	Small impromptu conferences/circles	Involve two or more people involved in low-level conflict; breaks the cycle of escalation and requires answering of restorative questions in front of each other, promoting expression of feelings and reflection on how actions affect others.
	Reintegrative management of shame	Anticipates that shame results when negative behaviors are addressed; Actively listens and acknowledges sharing of shameful feelings and rejects negative behaviors but not the person; Does not dwell on shame once acknowledged, but moves beyond.
Tier 2: Broad-based	Responsive circles	Conducted in a circle with no barriers; engage a group in addressing behavior that has negative effects on members and promotes responsibility for actions and making amends; opportunity to share feelings and plan for corrective measures.
Tier 3: Targeted	Restorative conferences <sup>2</sup>	Most formal of restorative practices; Held in response to a serious incident or pattern of less serious incidents; Involve a facilitator, offender, victim, and often their supporters (friends and family); Highly scripted, eliciting input in a set pattern from offender, victim, victim’s supporters, and offender’s supporters; Allows expression, then facilitates solution-making and reintegration of offender into the community.

Table 1 shows a variety of preventative elements of the SaferSanerSchools™ program. School-wide components include incorporating affective statements as common practice within the

<sup>1</sup> An excellent example of a student-led proactive circle can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdKhcQrLD1w>

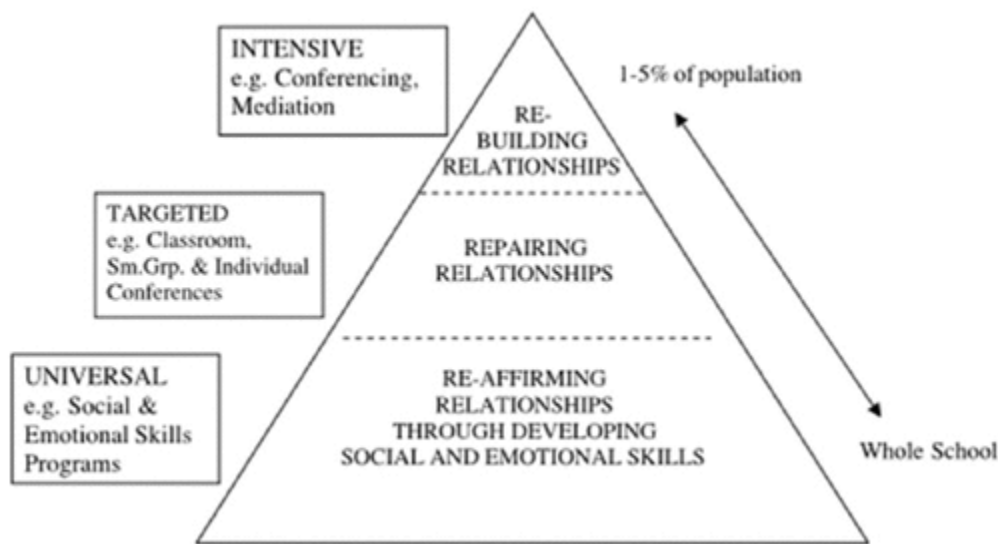
<sup>2</sup> An excellent example of a restorative conference can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSJ2GPiptvc>

culture of the school. Preventative elements also include broad-based elements such as actively building transparent, respectful, and meaningful relationships with families.

Meanwhile, the five core elements represented in Table 2 are *responsive* in nature, meaning they are implemented following a behavioral issue. These responsive elements include using restorative questions to allow those affected by a behavioral infraction to be heard and small impromptu conferences that aim to deescalate conflict and promote expression of feelings and reflection on how personal actions affect others.

Similar to a triangular public health model with three increasingly focused levels of treatment, Morrison and Vaandering (2012) conceptualize the elements of a school-wide restorative program, such as the one advocated by IIRP, as being *tiered*. At the base are universal elements experienced by all students. These Level 1 elements are modeled by everyone within a school at all times, including noninstructional personnel. The second tier of intervention aims to repair relationships once an infraction has occurred. These elements are targeted to specific groups in specific settings.

The third tier of intervention is the most intensive and is experienced by the smallest percentage of students. At this level, formal, scripted restorative conferences are held in response to a serious infraction, such as a fight. These conferences are facilitated by a trained faculty member, usually an administrator, and involve the offender, those harmed, and supporters of each. The focus of these conferences is on making amends, repairing relationships, and reintegrating the offender into the school community. These three tiers are summarized in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Hierarchy of restorative responses.

Though all staff members at a school implementing the SaferSanerSchools model should be knowledgeable of the core elements, not everyone participates in the activities involved at all levels of action (IIRP, n.d.). Building on Morrison and Vaandering's (2012) analogy to a health care model, the program elements practiced at the higher tiers are conducted by professionals within a school setting specially trained to lead them. Thus, Tier 2 actions are practiced by instructional personnel, administrators, and other professional staff. Tier 3 responses are

conducted by select individuals who have received specific training in the conferencing technique (IIRP, n.d.), such as administrators or pupil support personnel like school counselors and school psychologists.

### **Description of the Case and Early Implementation Efforts**

Tenacomakah Region Public Schools (TRPS) is a large, county-wide district in Central Virginia situated within 100 miles of both the state's and nation's capitals. Opened in 1979, Algonquin High School (AHS) has a current enrollment of approximately 1,400 students in Grades 9 to 12. The school is situated in a large suburban area in Central Virginia and serves a population of largely professional, executive, and managerial residents, per the school's 2014-2015 profile. Still, AHS enrolls a diverse student body. For example, according to the school's state report card from the 2014-2015 school year, Black, Asian, Hispanic, White, disabled, and economically disadvantaged students are all enrolled at a percentage high enough to be included in the school's aggregated data (Virginia Department of Education, 2015).

In 2008, the TRPS Code of Student Conduct stated that students and staff shared "a primary responsibility for creating a climate of mutual respect, honesty, and trust . . . in order that the dignity of the individual [was] protected" (Regulation 401.1). In the view of Dr. Riesling, AHS's school psychologist at the time, the outcomes imposed on students as a result of this then 20-page document did little to build this relationship between students and staff. Faced with political and community pressure to increase the Virginia Standards of Learning pass rates and to meet federal and state requirements for on-time graduation, Dr. Riesling further realized that the exclusionary discipline practices of suspension and expulsion likely negatively affected these measures of student academic success. Thus, Dr. Riesling began to view exclusionary practices as not only creating a culture of disrespect, dishonesty, and mistrust but was also affecting students' academic progress.

For the past year or so, Dr. Riesling had been studying alternative discipline practices, specifically, those that would build relationships as well as help them break the pattern of unequal and ineffective punishments. RPs seemed especially promising to Dr. Riesling since they are founded on the importance of relationships and community. RP is also predicated on respect for individuals, students, and staff alike and seeks to impart an understanding of how each person's actions affect others. Moreover, when these effects are negative, the offender has a responsibility to those affected by his actions to make amends.

Bolstered by studies that showed the positive effects of RPs, Dr. Riesling decided to submit a proposal to the TRPS Office of Student Conduct requesting formal training in RPs for the staff of that office, as well as for Student Services staff. He suggested the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, as the source of this training. Though the article was positively received, the county did not move forward with training at that time.

Undaunted and believing in the power of RP to facilitate much-needed change for the AHS community, Dr. Riesling engaged the AHS administrative team in conversations regarding school punishments, including in-school suspension (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS). Dr. Riesling reported that his efforts were bolstered by a supportive AHS administrative team led

by Principal Bob Bailey, whom Riesling described as having an inherent “humanistic slant” to discipline. Together, this team was able to secure a small, internal grant from TRPS that enabled them to bring in an RP trainer to provide 2 days of training to a small group of staff members. The original team receiving training included three high school’s administrators, the school psychologist (Dr. Riesling), counselors, and a handful of interested teachers.

It is important to point out that school district administration did not impose RPs on specific school administrators. Rather, as noted above, research into RPs was initiated by the school psychologist and supported by the principal at AHS. Then, implementation efforts were incremental, initiated in the principal’s office. For example, in 2008-2009, reflective, restorative questions became a standard written activity for students to complete when serving in-school detention, for example, “What were you thinking when you acted? Who was affected by your actions?” Students then shared their reflections with administrators in follow-up conversations. Restorative conferences were officially introduced in the 2010-2011 school year for students facing significant disciplinary consequences. According to Dr. Riesling and Principal Bailey, there was an immediate impact: *No student that year participated in a second conference for a similar offense.* By the 2011-2012 school year, all AHS administrators used formal, scripted restorative conferences. These first, basic successes were noticed by many within the school and across the district, adding interest in the possibilities RP afforded.

Simultaneous to these measures, two significant changes were unfolding that aided the eventual full-scale implementation of RPs at AHS. First, in 2010, TRPS began implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports© (PBIS) district-wide. Though this approach is not synonymous with RPs, it does share a similar philosophy of a tiered system of interventions and a supportive community. In the words of Dana Riley, an assistant principal, PBIS and RP both create “win-win situations” between students and staff. The adoption of PBIS throughout the school district helped foster a culture in which RPs could more easily take root.

Second, Renee Gladstone, another assistant principal at AHS, was involved in a continuing education leadership group in which she met with principals and assistant principals from across the state. Through this group, she learned of an ongoing, federally funded implementation of RPs at another school district approximately 80 miles away. An assistant principal employed in that district shared success stories related to RPs with Gladstone, and she was intrigued. In the 2011-2012 school year, the first full school year in which restorative conferences were used as a disciplinary practice by the administrative team at Algonquin, a partnership was forged between the two school districts that allowed them to send staff members, including principals and the school psychologist, to their neighbor’s trainings and professional development sessions free of charge when space allowed. This practice deepened Algonquin’s understanding and capacity to further implement RPs onsite.

In summer 2013, training was expanded to include interested teachers. Classroom implementation of RPs followed in the 2013-2014 school year. In addition, a professional learning community was created by and for interested faculty members to provide encouragement and strengthen prior training. The program expanded the following year with all-inclusive training and universal implementation.



Third, the following year, Dr. Riesling was promoted to a position within the central office, taking his knowledge and advocacy with him. Furthermore, in 2014 the PBIS coordinator of the district applied for and received a Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services Juvenile Accountability Block Grant to fund further implementation of RPs at Algonquin and to establish RPs at three additional high schools in 2014-2015. Riesling, the PBIS coordinator, and the instructional specialist for counseling services were all trained as RP instructors by the IIRP that year.

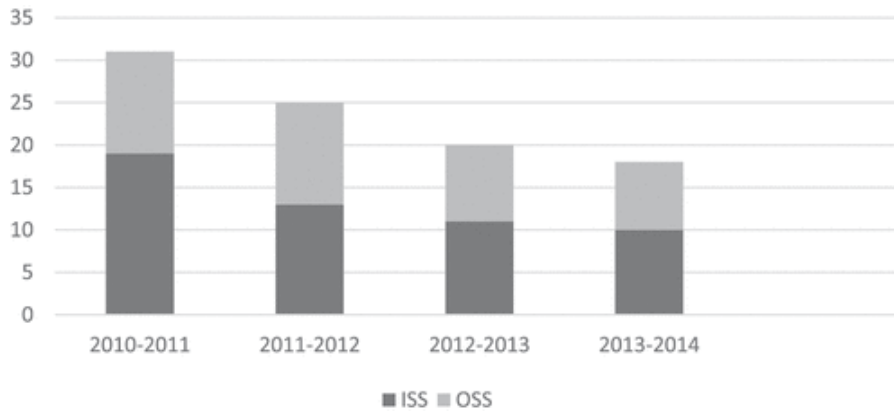
## **An Overview of Early Evaluation Results**

AHS' RPs are widely considered today to be successful by both building-level and central office administration. For example, AHS principal Bailey shared that when he assumed his position 5 years ago, the school reported more than 3,000 office referrals in a single year. Within 4 years, that number had diminished by more than 80% to approximately 500 referrals. The more they used RPs, the more AHS administrators were convinced of its value. And word spread to other principals in the district that RP was having a positive impact on historically persistent discipline gaps. Moreover, AHS principals could sense a change in students' and teachers' attitudes and a positive shift in the overall school culture. The perceived changes at AHS certainly caught the attention of school and district administrators. But before seriously considering scaling up, they wanted more than anecdotal evidence. So, they reached out to us to perform an outside evaluation of their implementation efforts so far.

In addition to conducting individual interviews with school and district administrators, we examined suspension data from 2010 to 2015 to determine what, if any, changes in discipline have occurred since implementing RPs. We also analyzed the past 5 years of the AHS Discipline Crime and Violence (DCV) Report submitted to the Virginia Department of Education annually. The data were further broken down by gender, race/ethnicity, and students with disabilities. Unique identifiers assigned in place of student names allowed us to track recidivism rates.

### **Overall Suspension Rates**

First, we determined whether there were any distinguishable trends in terms of the percentage of students who were suspended from 2010 to 2015. The discipline and suspension data clearly show that since the implementation of RPs 5 years ago, both ISS and OSS rates have declined. Since the 2010-2011 school year, AHS' overall student population has held relatively steady, ranging from 1,315 to 1,368 students. In the 2010-2011 school year, 19% of this student population received at least 1 day of ISS, while 12% of the student population received at least 1 day of OSS suspension. While the 2011-2012 school year yielded consistency with 12% of the population receiving OSS, a marked reduction in students receiving ISS that year emerged, falling six percentage points to 13% of the total population. This downward trend in the suspension rates culminated in the 2014-2015 school year with reported suspension rates in the single digits with 7% of the student body receiving ISS, and 7% of the population receiving OSS (see Figure 3).

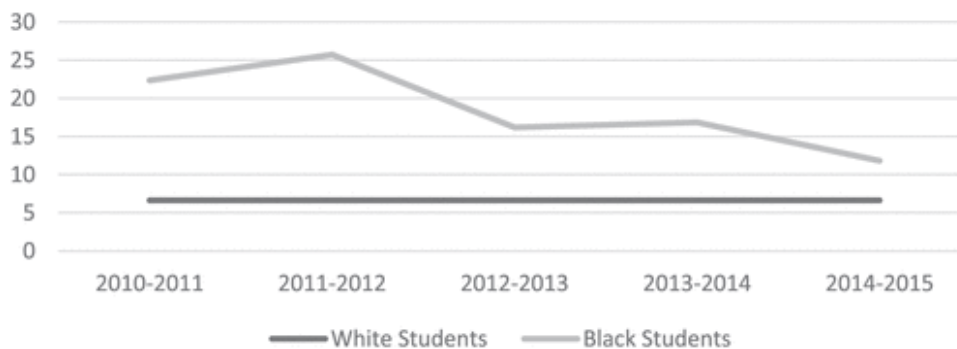


**Figure 3.** Percentage of student body assigned a suspension since initial implementation.

In addition to downward trends in the number of ISS and OSS, the nature of infractions leading to suspension shifted. For example, offences against another person dropped from 100 to 23 and those related to weapons fell from 5 to 0 during this 5-year period.

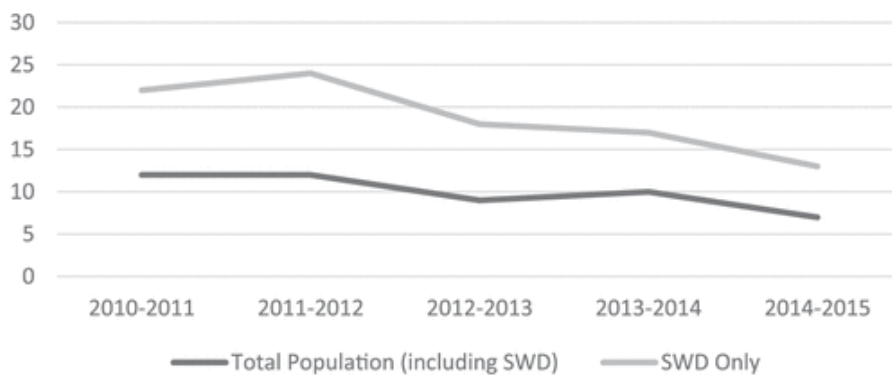
**OSS by race/ethnicity.** The suspension and discipline data provided by TRPS assigned students as belonging to one of six racial/ethnic categories: American Indian, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, White, and Multiple Races. The focus of this formative evaluation was on the “African American” and “White” student subgroups who were 32% and 54% of student body, respectively.

Figure 4 represents the pattern of exclusionary discipline for these two ethnicities in the 5-year span at AHS. As the literature points out, Black students are suspended at much higher rates than White students in the United States. This trend holds true at AHS. In 2010-2011, almost 7% of the White population at AHS received at least one day of OSS. Since the adoption of RP, suspension rates of the White population has fluctuated but reached a low of about 4% of the White population in the 2014-2015 school year. Even more noticeable is the decrease of suspension rates in the African American population. While a spike in the suspension rates of Black students occurred in the 2011-2012 school year, the suspension rate of Black students in the 3 years following illustrates a marked decrease for the population from nearly 26% suspended in 2011-2012 to approximately 12% in 2014-2015. In the 2014-2015 school year alone, the first year in which all AHS faculty were trained in RPs, a 5% reduction emerged compared with the previous school year.



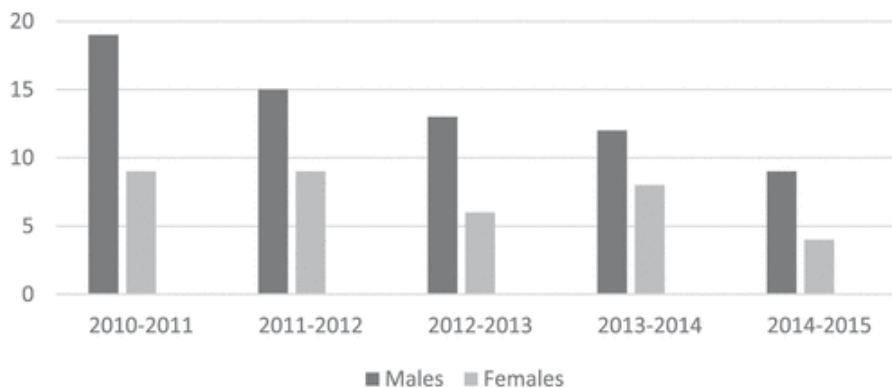
**Figure 4.** Percentage of racial/ethnic subgroup serving out-of-school suspension annually.

**OSS by disability status.** An analysis of data from the 2010-2011 school year showed that 22% of students with disabilities were suspended from school at least once. Comparably, only 12% of the total population (including the students with disabilities) was suspended out of school that year. As shown in Figure 5, following a slight increase of 2% during the 2011-2012 school year, the suspension rate of students with disabilities has steadily declined more than 10% in a 3-year span. While students with disabilities are suspended at a higher percentage rate than the total population in every year, the gap in suspensions between the two groups has decreased since 2011-2012 school year during the implementation of RP at AHS. However, it is important to note that the suspension ratio between total population and students with disabilities would be greater if the portion of students with disabilities were removed from the count of overall suspensions.



**Figure 5.** OSS percentage for students with disabilities compared with total students.

The DCV supports the same trend illuminated by the analysis of the discipline data received from Tenacomakah. Not only where there decreases in the number of students with disabilities facing suspension in each of the previous 4 years, but for the 2014-2015 school year, no long-term suspensions of 10 or more days were reported for students with disabilities. This was the only year of the 5 reviewed in which no students with disabilities faced such a lengthy exclusion.

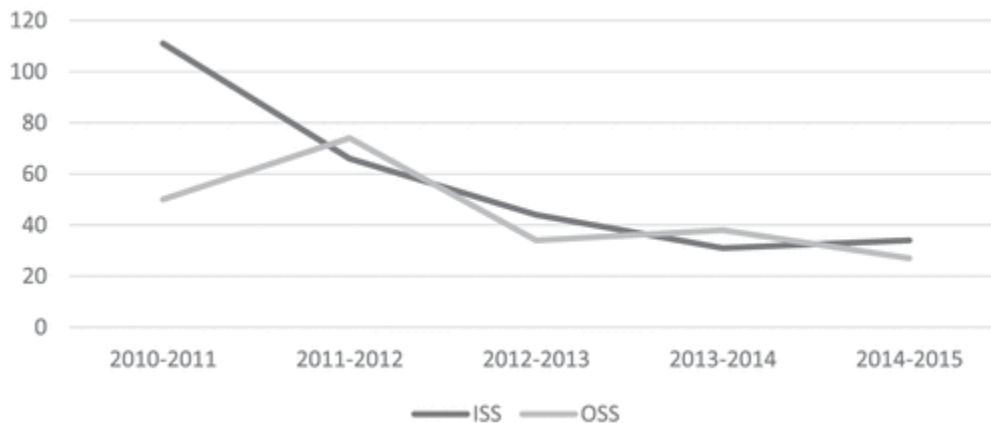


**Figure 6.** OSS percentages at Algonquin High School by Gender.

**OSS by gender.** In the 2010-2011 school year, 15% of male students received OSS. In a 5-year span, there was a large decrease in suspension of males. That is, only 9% of the male population received an OSS suspension in 2014-2015 (Figure 6). Though the female OSS rate varied over

the implementation of RP, female OSS suspensions dropped from a rate of 9% in 2010-2011 to just 4% in the 2014-2015 school year (Figure 6). The greatest decline in the percentage of both genders receiving OSS occurred during the 2014-2015 school year.

**Recidivism rates for ISS and OSS.** We also were curious to know how the recidivism rates compared since the implementation of restorative practices. So we looked at the number of students who received ISS more than once in a given school year. As Figure 7 shows, 111 Algonquin students received ISS during the 2010-2011 school year. By 2014-2015 this number has been cut by two thirds. Similarly, the number of students receiving OSS was cut by almost half with 50 students receiving OSS in 2010-2011 compared with 27 students in 2014-2015 (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Annual recidivism rates for students receiving ISS and OSS.

### Challenges to Implementation and Sustainability

As with many schools and districts across the United States, teacher turnover is a serious concern. That, in addition to promotions within the district, threatened sustaining the capacity of the AHS faculty to practice RPs. Principal Bailey pointed out that he “had a lot of people promoted out of the building [in 2015-2016], which is great, but also a little scary” in terms of building-level capacity to practice RP. For example, Renee Gladstone, the associate principal who was identified by her counterpart Dana Riley as being “in charge of spearheading [restorative practices] and making sure that the PLCs moved forward” was promoted to principal of a different TRPS high school. Dr. Riesling, current Supervisor of Psychological Services, expressed his concern for continued use of RP at Algonquin, stating,

One of the challenges is turnover of the key stakeholders for restorative practices. . . . We thought we were building some good sustainability with [Algonquin over the years, but] with the loss of the administrators who have transferred out due to promotions, my concern is [will Algonquin] . . . see continued movement forward with restorative practices? . . . So one element that needs to be improved upon is how do you plan for that sustainability with the turnover, whether it be teachers, whether it be the administrative team.

Funding is an additional challenge to implementation and sustainability. Recall that in the 2014-2015 school year, a \$25,000 grant was secured through the Department of Criminal Justice Services. This funding has supported AHS's RP program, as well as the expansion of RP into other TRPS schools. While some capacity exists in the school system at this point to provide its own training in RP, TRPS does not currently have the resources to fully maintain the effort without sustenance from outside sources.

Experienced staff and money to support continued training are necessary to sustain the implementation of RP at AHS. While Mr. Bob Bailey has continued to serve as the principal in the school since RP was first introduced, much turnover has occurred in both his administrative and teaching staff. Each change in staff requires an additional training need for the coming year. Though AHS has been successful in identifying creative sources for providing this training, including securing grants, partnering with other school systems, and using in-house personnel when possible, the issue of sustainably supporting the training has not yet been resolved.

### **Conclusions and Unanswered Questions**

Overall, the findings gathered from discipline data and interviewing school administrators suggest that discipline gaps across race/ethnicity, gender, and special education status have shrunk over the past 5 years. While correlation does not equal causality, we agree with participants that RP has likely contributed to these downward trends in suspension and recidivism and thus, may be a viable alternative to punitive discipline procedures.

During a postevaluation check-in with the Principal Bailey we learned that while progress has continued since the last round of data collection, he is troubled by pockets of teacher resistance. According to Principal Bailey,

We continue to use Restorative Practices throughout the building and anytime we use them-particularly the conference-we have positive movement. There is . . . resistance in parts of the faculty . . . the difficult part is keeping the momentum fresh, the information at the forefront, and the buy-in high.

Thus, while we view RP as a positive step in the right direction, there are still unanswered questions. For example, why is there some teacher resistance? What are teachers' perceptions around RP in terms of its efficacy and implementation process? In addition, while statistics show downward trends in overall punitive discipline as well as gaps between disaggregated groups, why do gaps remain? Furthermore, why are exclusionary practices still part of the repertoire available to educators in this setting? There are many possible answers to these questions. According to Morris (2016), a major problem is the lack of persistence of those who may expect change to happen much more quickly than can be realistically expected. This major shift in world view is difficult work and takes time. And principals, resource officers, teachers and counselors "are not the only ones who are still adjusting to this new paradigm" (Morris, 2016, p. 231). Students (and in the case of Morris' study, Black girls), also struggle to adapt to new patterns of expectations.

It is important to note that we are currently interpreting data collected via teacher surveys and student focus groups to further understand the implementation process and the efficacy of RPs to help members of the school community make data-based decisions regarding future practice. We hope to begin teasing out why gaps remain as well as begin to examine possible relationships between intersecting identities (e.g., What is the nature of discipline infractions for Black girls when compared with White girls and/or Black boys). Also, we hope to learn the source of teachers' resistance. Do they disagree with the theory behind RP? Or do they feel they need more training to fully implement the program? Do teachers have recommendations on how program implementation can be improved? And what do students think about RPs? Have they noticed positive benefits or negative implications? Do students notice differences between the ways teachers implement the program? Do they have recommendations for improving discipline procedures in their school? Continuing our examination of the data should contribute to our understanding of some of the remaining challenges noted during our recent conversation with Mr. Bailey.

While we aim to avoid mono-method bias by triangulating data across at least three data sources, we do not claim this ongoing evaluation possesses external validity. That is, we do not assert generalizability of the treatment (RP) on outcomes (discipline gaps) for other contexts. And while there are still unanswered questions, it is still without hesitation that we encourage school administrators, regardless of their settings, to interrogate and ameliorate exclusionary and inequitable discipline by harnessing the potential of restorative practices. We agree with Monique Morris (2016) that "imperfect implementation should not lead to an abandonment of the idea" (p. 232). Besides, as Morris' study reminds us, "We've been doing prisons for over four-hundred-something years, and they *clearly* don't work. So, let's try restorative justice for about one hundred [years]" (Morris, 2016, p. 232, emphasis and substitution in original). We are hopeful that our continued presence in the field over the next few years will harvest additional knowledge that both scholars and practitioners will find useful, ultimately resulting in greater equity for historically marginalized students.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests.** The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding.** The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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