

## Report: Restorative practices working in RCSD

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Michael Kelly was acting like a fool. He didn't deny it. That is why, by 9 a.m. one recent morning, he was sitting in the ninth-grade help zone at Wilson Magnet High School rather than in class.

He wasn't there to get lectured by an administrator, though. In fact, the one doing most of the talking was Dynasty Rutledge, a 12th-grader trained as a restorative practices student leader.

"You know (International Baccalaureate) is strict; it's hard," she told Kelly and another classmate, Nazareth Dziewiecki (it was an advanced-track class they'd been kicked out of). "You're probably learning crucial stuff right now, but instead you're sitting in here — and for what?"

For nothing, they answered sheepishly.

"I don't know what was up with me today," Michael said. "I was just doing too much."

"Is there something else you can do next time?" Dynasty asked.

"Yeah, chill," he said. The period ended and the boys went on to their next class.

Five years ago, Michael's bad morning probably would have cost him more dearly. Across the Rochester City School District, minor student infractions were often answered with thousands of suspensions in and out of school, with no particular attention paid to what happened when the student eventually returned.

A landmark community report in 2014 drew attention to that problem and helped set in motion a series of reforms. Now, nearly five years later, the results are coming in.

Discipline data compiled into a new report by The Children's Agenda shows that suspension rates have fallen substantially with the implementation of restorative justice practices and a new code of conduct. Perhaps more noteworthy, corresponding academic figures show a decline in the number of students who

who lack the time or inclination to hear students out. Wilson is regarded as one of the district's forerunners in adopting restorative practices, but even there some teachers and staff are resistant.

"I can tell which teachers are open to restorative (practices) because they're more patient and understanding and give kids a chance," another student leader, 10th-grader Beautiful Ford, said. "And once I see a teacher listens and hears my opinion — now I know I can come to that teacher and have a relationship."

### Expanding the practice

RCSD has come under fire before for keeping inaccurate discipline and attendance data; some parents have said their children are simply told to go home and not come back for a few days without a formal suspension being recorded.

The data on course failures, though, helps corroborate the declining suspension rates.

"That seems to be the best data to see the pattern emerge because it's harder to fudge," Eamonn Scanlon, the report author, said. "Either you failed a class or you didn't."

The district's commitment to the concept is such that even the school board and central administration have pledged to enact peace circles and other restorative practices to help resolve their own personal conflicts.

Dynasty and Beautiful said the principles of restorative practice have made them feel empowered to address even broader issues in their school.

For instance, they noted, students might start the day in a better mood if they didn't need to take their boots off at the metal detector in the winter, soaking their socks in the process. And why, for that matter, do city children need to pass through metal detectors when suburban children do not?

"It makes you think: 'Dang, what, do they think I'm a threat just because of where I live?'" Beautiful said.

The report comes with several recommendations, the first one being to "expand and deepen" restorative practices by introducing them at lower grade levels —

are suspended from school and subsequently fail a course.

Over the last five years, according to the report:

■ The total number of suspensions is down 40 percent, with the largest decline coming the first year that the new code of conduct was in place.

■ The greatest reduction has been in long-term suspensions of 10 days or more, which are down 138 percent.

■ The number of courses failed by students who were suspended at least once also fell sharply, down 28 percent.

■ Many fewer suspensions are being handed out for the broad reason of “other disruptive incidents,” which advocates identified as a catch-all category that often betrayed racial bias.

■ All demographic groups have seen suspension rates decline, but students with disabilities, boys and black students are still punished disproportionately.

The report, and the district, attribute the improving statistics to the ongoing implementation of restorative justice practices. Broadly, that means an emphasis on relationship-building and a commitment to involve all parties in an incident in resolving the hurt caused.

“Suspensions are a crisis intervention,” the report author, Eamonn Scanlon, said. “Restorative (practice) is creating an environment where you don’t need to suspend.”

### 10 minutes and a cup of cocoa

Wilson is one of the schools that has been most successful in changing its climate. Long-term suspensions dropped from 69 four years ago to just one so far this year.

Perhaps most impressive, the school has done so without much additional targeted funding, as East High School and other receivership schools received.

Aesthetically, the ninth-grade help zone there is no oasis. The walls are dinged and the furniture apparently cast off. What would be one decent-sized room is instead partitioned into four tiny ones.

Sharon Ruth, the help zone coordinator, makes up for the drab appearance with a stock of snacks and a

the emphasis thus far has been on secondary schools — and training all staff on the new code of conduct.

It also calls for a total ban on suspensions for students in grades K-2; a limit of 20 days for long-term suspensions; and more transparent data-sharing.

Some of those recommendations, including keeping several restorative practice coaches on board once their grant funding runs out, will have budget implications. Distinguished Educator Jaime Aquino endorsed the work of the district’s Task Force on School Climate, including restorative practices, and the academic results in the new report by The Children’s Agenda bode well.

“In the past, a lot of suspensions were nonviolent incidents — not hitting someone or anything, just having a bad day and saying something you shouldn’t have said,” Beautiful said.

“Restorative (practice) keeps more kids in school. Which is what we should want.”

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**Wilson students Nazareth Dziejewicki (facing middle) and Michael Kelly, who were asked to leave class for being disruptive, come to the ninth-grade help zone, where fellow students Beautiful Ford, left, and Dynasty Rutledge help them to better understand their issues and those of the teacher. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

willingness to listen to students when other adults in the building may not have had time.

“Sometimes it’s just a snack and we have a cup of cocoa together, and after 10 minutes they feel so much better,” she said.

Dynasty is one of about a dozen restorative student leaders at Wilson. They were hand-selected for the task and went through two days of training to learn, as she said, “to make people comfortable to talk to you, and listen to listen instead of listening to respond.”

Sometimes their role means mediating between their peers and teachers



**Sharon Ruth, the help zone coordinator, helps students talk through school conflicts or home problems. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**