Ex-Cop-Turned-UTSA-Lecturer brings “restorative discipline” to San Antonio

Pilot project at middle school sees 84 percent drop in suspensions

By Jesus Chavez and Jean Luc Mette (UTSA, Jan. 29, 2014)

A quote attributed to Victor Hugo says, “He who opens a school door, closes a prison.” Looking at the disproportionate amount of school dropouts among America’s inmates, the French writer’s words seem as relevant as ever, even 130 years after his passing.

The so-called “school-to-prison pipeline,” examined by several studies, sees a direct link between school dropout rates and incarceration. The nonprofit Texas Appleseed, for instance, reported that every third youth in a Texan locked-down facility has already dropped out of school, and more than 80 percent of Texas adult prison inmates are school dropouts. And yet, each year thousands and thousands of high school students face disciplinary charges increasing their likelihood of future detainment. According to a growing number of experts, many of these charges could be prevented.

“Schools are mirroring the punitive, zero-tolerance policies of our justice system,” says Robert Rico, a lecturer in the Department of Criminal Justice in UTSA’s College of Public Policy. “But the mere fact that our country has the highest incarceration rate in the world proves that our system is failing.” Rico knows what he’s talking about. Growing up in a rough neighborhood on San Antonio's Westside, he successfully wrestled his way through high school and went on to become a police officer. During his many years in law enforcement, however, he frequently found himself questioning his own path, contemplating about ways to have a bigger impact, to help more people.

In 2001, when Rico started his Master’s in Public Administration at UTSA, he was inspired by the work of UTSA faculty members John Byrd and Dr. Michael Gilbert, who were spearheading the fairly young movement of “restorative justice” in San Antonio. This non-punitive, prevention-oriented approach fosters consensus-based decisions to resolve conflicts. Conversing instead of penalizing, Rico was hooked and started a restorative justice program with the Boerne Police Department. “Instead of just punishing the offender, restorative justice puts emphasis on the victim,” he explains. “It’s about repairing the harms created by getting all parties involved and starting a dialogue.”

When John Byrd passed away in 2008 after a brief and severe illness, Rico joined forces with Dr. Gilbert to continue Byrd’s pioneering work. Gilbert, while still a Criminal Justice professor at UTSA, today serves as Executive Director of the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice; Rico retired from law enforcement to pursue a career in academia at UTSA.

In 2012, Rico initiated a pilot project at San Antonio’s Edward H. White Middle School, based on “restorative discipline,” which applies restorative justice principles in a school setting. Aiming to reduce Ed White’s discipline rates, which are among the highest in the district, sixth-grade teachers were trained during the summer, before restorative discipline methods were put into practice for the 2012-2013 school year. The first results are dramatic: In addition to an 84 percent drop in off-campus suspensions (whereby a student is prohibited from being on the premises for a specified length of time), total suspensions declined by 44 percent. The massive decrease does not necessarily entail congruently less student conflicts; it rather reflects that teachers are now responding to student misbehavior in a different way.
The three-year research project at Ed White is overseen by Dr. Marilyn Armour, professor at UT Austin’s School of Social Work and director of The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue. She explains, “When a student misbehaves, instead of saying ‘go to the office,’ it’s about stopping and engaging with that student in a meaningful way. It’s time-consuming, but it’s about investing in the creation of a different kind of climate that pays dividends when times get tough.”

One key method teachers are implementing at Ed White is restorative circles, led by an adult facilitator. These circles search for a consensus-based solution, thereby creating a setting for conflicting students that puts emphasis on mutual respect and deep listening. If agreed upon, the solution is then written in a binding document that all circle participants sign and promise to uphold. “The truth of the matter is that children want to be heard,” says Rico. “Traditional disciplinary measures aren’t conducive to that. Restorative circles give children the chance to feel equal and express themselves to their peers and teachers. In turn, teachers can deepen or restore the teacher-student relationship into a level of mutual respect and understanding.”

While a high turnover in teaching staff and some teacher resistance to the new approach contributed toward inconsistencies, Rico noted that even with these challenges Ed White Middle School made “sturdy and noteworthy progress in its first year, and the lessons learned will be invaluable when we extend the program.” Seventh- and eighth-grade teachers are up next in the training schedule, with the goal of having all teachers trained by 2014-2015, the final year of the project.

“It’s a no-brainer, if you think about it,” says Rico. “Restorative discipline shows the highest rates of victim satisfaction and offender accountability, making it a very efficient way to lower dropout rates.”

Or, in other words: He who keeps a student in school, closes a prison door.

More information and a report on the first project year can be found at www.irjrd.org.