Restorative discipline program in
San Antonio school reduces suspensions

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(Dec. 16, 2013) -- A San Antonio middle school with some of the highest discipline rates in its district has experienced an 84 percent drop in off-campus suspensions during the last year since administrators began using "restorative discipline" as an alternative to "zero tolerance" to deal with conflicts among students.

Restorative discipline is a prevention-oriented approach that fosters consensus-based decisions to resolve school conflict such as bullying, truancy and disruptive behavior. Sixth-grade teachers at Edward H. White Middle School in San Antonio's North East Independent School District were trained during the summer of 2012 in restorative discipline methods by a team headed by Marilyn Armour, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work and director of the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue.

"The main goal is to create a different kind of school climate," Armour explained. "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 is time consuming, but it's about investing in the creation of a different kind of climate that pays dividends when times get tough."

In addition to the 84 percent drop in the use of off-campus suspension (whereby a student is prohibited from being on campus for a specified length of time), the dividends of restorative discipline included a 44 percent drop in total suspensions, which includes off-campus...
suspensions and all other suspensions that allow students to remain in school while they are being disciplined. Armour stressed that the drop in suspensions does not necessarily mean that there are fewer student conflicts. It reflects that teachers are responding to student misbehavior in a different way.

Restorative circles are one key method teachers are implementing at Edward H. White Middle School. Led by an adult facilitator, a restorative circle brings together the students in conflict in a setting that emphasizes mutual respect, deep listening and the search for a consensus-based solution. The solution agreed upon is then written in a binding document that all circle participants sign and promise to uphold.

Armour's work at the school is part of a three-year research project initiated by principal Philip Carney. He heard about restorative discipline from Robert Rico, a lecturer in the Department of Criminal Justice in the College of Public Policy at The University of Texas at San Antonio, and now a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work.

Rico was instrumental in bringing Armour and Carney together. He was a consultant on the project during the first year, visiting the middle school campus twice a week and providing direct support to teachers.

"The truth of the matter is that children want to be heard," said Rico. "Traditional disciplinary measures aren't conducive to that. Through restorative circles, children are given 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."

Armour's report after the first year showed that high turnover in sixth-grade teaching staff and some teacher resistance to the new way of dealing with student misconduct contributed toward inconsistencies and other challenges with implementation. She noted, however, that even with these challenges, Ed White Middle School made "sturdy and noteworthy progress in its first year." She said the lessons learned would be invaluable in extending the program. Seventh- and eighth-grade teachers are next in the training schedule during the next two years, with the goal of having all teachers trained by 2014-2015, the final year of the project.

Research team member Stephanie Frogge said that students embraced restorative discipline methods and even added their own original contributions to the program. Last year, students came up with the idea of a form they could fill out to request a restorative circle whenever they felt there was a situation that needed to be addressed.

According to Frogge, "circling it" is becoming a popular phrase at Ed White Middle School.

"There was this tense situation between a sixth and a seventh grader," said Frogge. "And, the older girl said I could fight you, but I'm not going to do it. I'm going to circle it."

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