

FBISD approaching discipline in a new way

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Jerrie Kammerman, principal of Missouri City Middle School, is the first principal in Fort Bend Independent School District to implement the restorative discipline program focusing on building relationships between students, staff, administrators and parents. Parents credit her with turning around a chaotic campus into a positive learning environment.

After [Pamela Thompson](#)'s sixth-grade daughter got into a dispute this year with another student at [Missouri City Middle School](#), Thompson was struck by how the discipline process has changed.

A similar situation had led to a suspension for her son, now 20, when he was a student at a different Fort Bend ISD campus.

But in her daughter's case, school administrators held a roundtable discussion with the students involved and their parents.

Thompson said the administrators "engaged in trying to find out the story behind what occurred.

"It was great," she added.

Until several years ago, a misbehaving student was typically removed from the classroom, Principal [Jerrie Kammerman](#) said.

The suspensions didn't stop students from acting out at school.

In the 2013-14 school year, 186 fights were documented on campus and 1,789 discipline referrals were issued in the first semester for the school, which had an enrollment of about 1,200.

"I don't want to create a picture of absolute chaos when I got here, but it was a campus in need," said Kammerman, who took over as principal in the spring of 2014 after being the principal at Fort Bend ISD's [First Colony Middle School](#) in Sugar Land. "I got here in February, and it took me until May to have a fight-free day."

That spring, Kammerman attended a presentation at a conference on an alternative way to handle discipline, something that aligned with her philosophy, Kammerman said. Called restorative discipline, it was focused on preventing poor behavior instead of punishing it. Hoping the techniques would prevent fist fights between students, Kammerman decided to use them when she and other administrators interacted with students.

The results were startling.

"Restorative discipline has really shifted the mind-set and the culture of our campus," Kammerman told Fort Bend ISD trustees in January. "It truly has."

Fewer fights reported

During the 2014-15 school year, a 27 percent reduction occurred in fights at Missouri City, down to 136.

This school year, all teachers at the school have started using its techniques in classrooms. As of January, there had only been 27 fights.

At roughly the same time as Kammerman was learning about restorative discipline, Fort Bend ISD officials were independently planning to implement the method in sixth-grade at almost every district middle school.

The district has been trying to find ways of addressing misbehavior without removing students from the classroom since 2012, when Fort Bend ISD's disproportionate disciplining of some groups of minority students sparked the U.S. Department of Education's [Office of Civil Rights](#) to begin a compliance review. According to a U.S. Department of Education spokesman, the investigation is ongoing.

"Fort Bend ISD came to us and said, 'Look, we know we're in trouble. We want to put this into our schools,'" said [Marilyn Armour](#), a professor in the [University of Texas at Austin's School of Social Work](#) and the director of the university's [Institute for Restorative Justice](#) and Restorative Dialogue.

Armour founded the institute in 2008 to help agencies and organizations implement restorative discipline.

This school year, Fort Bend ISD put restorative discipline in place for sixth-grade students at 12 of the district's other 13 middle schools.

Derived from practices originally used in the criminal justice system, restorative discipline focuses on building relationships and fostering a better school climate to prevent students from acting out.

When students do misbehave, instead of focusing on punishment, authority figures try to understand why a student did so and work with that student to prevent a recurrence. The method can be extended beyond just student and staff relationships to interactions between teachers, principals and parents.

The approach has been in use in public schools in states ranging from Minnesota to California for years, but gained attention in Texas after it helped turn around a struggling San Antonio middle school in 2012.

State funds grant

Last February, a \$521,000 grant from the [Texas Education Agency](#) provided funding for Armour and the institute to administer free training on restorative discipline to public school districts across Texas.

Fort Bend ISD staff, including middle school principals and counselors, attended six multiday trainings sessions conducted by the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue in restorative discipline techniques between March and August of 2015, one of which was funded by the TEA's grant.

In August, Fort Bend ISD administrators conducted separate trainings for bus drivers, teachers, cafeteria managers and middle school police officers.

The district's middle school administrators use the techniques when a sixth-grade student receives a disciplinary referral.

Instead of approaching the issue by trying to find out who broke the rules and then punish the student, administrators now ask students why they acted out, how it affected the people around them and what they can do to solve the problem, said [Dawn Carlson](#), the district's director of student affairs.

This often happens in what's called a circle - where the affected individuals meet and talk through the problem - just like what happened to Thompson's daughter.

"When we think about teaching kids we always think about teaching them academics, but we don't always think about teaching them behavior," Carlson said. "We don't think about how to teach them to respond in a certain situation if they get frustrated, if they get angry, if someone says something to them."

Since 2012, the district has seen disciplinary referrals drop across grade levels.

Since the 2012-13 and the 2014-15 school years, the number of in-school suspensions, in which a student is removed from the classroom but stays at school, dropped by more than half, from 8,642 to 4,170 at the high school level and by 3,772, from 7,243 to 3,471, at the middle school level. Its out-of-school suspensions, when a student is removed from the campus for up to three days, also dropped during the period, from 3,181 suspensions at the high school level to 2,152 and from 2,609 at the middle school level to 2,073.

Superintendent [Charles Dupre](#) attributes this drop to the district's increased awareness about overdisciplining its students. But, he added, restorative discipline has emerged as an important tool.

"The real difference has come from just looking at data regularly and having regular conversations about student discipline," Dupre said. "We're obligated to provide every student a high-quality education, and we're not doing that if we're suspending them."

McAuliffe to be next

The only Fort Bend ISD middle school that didn't meet Texas Education Agency standards and that had more disciplinary referrals than Missouri City Middle School, is [Christa McAuliffe](#) in Missouri City.

McAuliffe is also the district's only middle school where restorative discipline was not in place this year for sixth grade.

Because there were other changes happening at that school related to improving its academics, the district thought that it would be overwhelming to add another program to the campus, Dupre said.

He now regrets this choice.

"I think they would have benefited," Dupre said.

The district is planning to implement restorative discipline at McAuliffe and in seventh grades at all middle schools next year, and likely eighth grade or high school levels in the third year, district spokesperson Amanda Bubela said.

Despite Missouri City Middle School's successful results, Armour cautioned against viewing restorative discipline as a quick fix.

It's normal to see immediate drops in the number of disciplinary referrals at a school because suspensions are no longer an administrator's go-to option. However, to be truly effective, restorative discipline requires a three- to five-year roll-out period, Armour said.

Districts in the past have implemented restorative discipline in too many schools too fast, Armour said. Without proper support for the campus' staff, it isn't sustainable. Plus, not all students immediately respond, Armour added, which is why Carlson said traditional discipline such as in- and out-of-school suspensions are still options.

"I don't want you to think that the middle schools are standing around singing 'Kumbaya,'" Carlson said to Fort Bend ISD's board at a January meeting. "It doesn't replace disciplinary consequences, but it adds a lot to it."

Though Missouri City Middle School's discipline numbers have dropped, it still has more discipline referrals than other Fort Bend ISD campuses, Carlson said.

Participating in a circle didn't prevent Thompson's daughter from encountering problems, her mom said. "But she's handling it differently," Thompson said. "She's using the approaches that she got in the meeting."