

Northwestern College, Iowa

**NWCommons**

---

Master's Theses & Capstone Projects

Education

---

Summer 2023

## Improving Discipline Practices with Restorative Justice: A School Improvement Project

Ryan Schultz

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education\\_masters](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

**Improving Discipline Practices with Restorative Justice:**

**A School Improvement Plan**

Ryan D. Schultz

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

### **Abstract**

Research indicates that punitive discipline practices, such as zero-tolerance policies and exclusionary approaches, have shown limited effectiveness and create potential harm in schools. In contrast, school discipline and culture based on restorative practices have shown great promise as an alternative. This school improvement plan seeks to promote a change from a punitive, exclusionary discipline system to a research-based system rooted in restorative methods in a suburban public school district in the Midwest. The goal is to integrate restorative practices within the district's existing MTSS framework, emphasizing equity prioritization, healthy relationships, and positive alternatives to exclusionary punishments. By educating staff, students, and the community, encouraging stakeholder buy-in, and providing professional training, the project aims to establish a transformative shift towards a more positive disciplinary approach grounded in restorative principles. The action plan outlines key strategies, including stakeholder involvement, hiring a restorative discipline coordinator, and embedding therapeutic techniques in classrooms. The ultimate goal is to foster a positive disciplinary culture based on restorative justice that improves student well-being, increases academic success, reduces suspensions and lost learning time, creates a culture of accountability, repairs harm, restores dignity, and ensures equitable treatment within the district.

*Keywords:* Restorative justice, restorative practices, restorative methods, restorative discipline, school discipline, punitive, exclusionary, equity, suspensions

### Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review.....	7
Site Profile .....	21
Community Characteristics.....	21
School District Characteristics.....	21
Student Performance.....	22
Parent Involvement .....	22
School Mission and Vision .....	23
Current Student Learning Goals .....	23
Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.....	24
Professional Development.....	24
Needs Assessment.....	25
School Data & Analysis.....	26
Data Summary .....	26
Weaknesses .....	34
Strengths .....	34
Assessment Needs.....	35
Action Plan.....	35
Strategies and Themes .....	35
Steps to Solve the Problem .....	37
Implementation of School Improvement Plan.....	41
Timeline .....	41
Resources .....	42
Staff Responsibilities .....	43
Data Collection and Monitoring .....	45
Barriers and Challenges.....	45

Conclusion .....46  
References.....48

### **Improving Discipline Practices with Restorative Justice: A School Improvement Plan**

Punitive discipline practices, including zero tolerance policies such as exclusionary approaches (exclusions, suspensions, office referrals, and alternative placements), have been used extensively in schools despite mounting evidence that these policies do little to deter future misbehavior and can have potentially harmful effects. These effects include increased dropout rates, delinquency, less access to educational time, more physical, social, and emotional health issues, and unfavorable impacts on school culture and climate. Along with being ineffective and harmful, much prior research indicates that punitive discipline methods increase the likelihood of disparity and equity issues (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Taskforce, 2008, as cited in Weaver & Swank, 2020, p. 1). In addition to affecting all students, exclusionary discipline has been used disproportionately with historically marginalized groups, including minoritized by race, disability, socioeconomics, and gender. Despite extensive research showing the harmful effects and inequities associated with zero tolerance and exclusionary policies, little has been done to effectively change the engrained discipline philosophies and structures in most schools. Although the Cedar Falls Community School District in Cedar Falls, Iowa, has made initial strides to shift away from punitive and exclusionary discipline policies, a thorough commitment and vision have not yet been articulated. Moreover, there has been little district-wide training, consistent groundwork, or expectation set forth regarding better practices from the district for all staff and buildings. Consequently, the district continues to operate with inconsistencies and incoherence concerning its overall discipline practices and philosophy, and its movement away from punitive and exclusionary approaches is incomplete.

This school improvement project aims to use research-based strategies to move the district toward fully implementing a well-articulated discipline philosophy rooted in restorative

justice practices that fit cohesively within its existing MTSS framework. Abdou et al. (2023) define restorative practices as "a positive school discipline framework that offers structural alternatives to exclusionary punishments while cultivating school practices that prioritize equity and healthy relationships" (pp. 1-2). Mansfield et al. (2018) add, "When issues arise, RPs bring educators and students together in the school setting for the purpose of goal-setting and mutual resolution" (p. 305). By promoting the benefits of restorative justice approaches through the education of staff, students, and the community, encouraging the buy-in of all stakeholders, and providing professional training opportunities to staff, it is the author's goal to establish a robust shift away from exclusionary discipline policies to a more positive discipline approach.

This school improvement project relies on evidence-based support for using restorative justice practices over punitive discipline approaches and provides considerations, best practices, and models for implementation. Research for this paper was drawn from the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, the WorldCat discovery tool through DeWitt Library, and Google Scholar. Each article was peer-reviewed and published within the last ten years, providing qualitative and quantitative data relevant to the project. The author focused on articles derived from studies based mostly in the United States and focused primarily on public schools. This scope of research was used to gain insights most relevant to the district involved in the school improvement plan.

The belief is that a total commitment to and implementation of restorative practices (vs. punitive or zero-tolerance philosophies) will increase attendance, lower suspension and dropout rates, increase learning time, decrease any equity gaps that might exist, improve students' overall health, and enhance the culture and climate of the district. The positive attributes of restorative justice discipline policies have proven to be grounded in evidence-based research, and the

inclusion of this philosophy into the existing tiered system of supports will provide a connected, systematic way of fostering positive interactions and problem-solving mechanisms to proactively deter misbehavior and handle situations more positively when they occur. Interventions grounded in establishing relationships, mutual respect, and equity and allowing avenues to repair harm will be more effective than past punitive, exclusionary, and zero-tolerance policies. As all stakeholders (students, staff, and community) see the benefits of restorative justice practices in action and become accustomed to new ways of communicating and handling misbehavior, momentum will build, and a new culture will take hold.

The literature review will begin by comparing and contrasting the effectiveness of punitive discipline approaches with restorative discipline philosophies and investigating why there is increasing support for using restorative practices in schools. Secondly, discipline disparity and equity issues will be explored concerning the current status of punitive discipline and the promise of restorative discipline to alleviate the existing inequities. Next, the author will examine the positive outcomes of restorative discipline practices. Finally, best practices for the implementation of restorative discipline in schools will be discussed.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Punitive vs. Restorative**

Recent studies have begun to show how restorative discipline practices can provide numerous benefits and a positive, viable alternative to punitive approaches that have been widely used for decades. Punitive discipline, also known as zero tolerance, relies on enforcing strict, mandated rules, punishments centered on obedience, and exclusionary practices to deter student misbehavior (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). On the other hand, restorative discipline approaches are centered on repairing harm to create positive school climates, instilling

accountability through communication and problem-solving, and restoring relationships between the people involved in conflicts or misbehavior (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018).

The negative aspects of punitive discipline and the positive attributes of restorative discipline are apparent. Brown (2021) used a qualitative research design and critical analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and real-world examples to compare two schools with distinctly different discipline philosophies. Southern Middle School used exclusionary (punitive) practices as their primary form of discipline. At Southern Middle School, both the unduplicated In-School-Suspension (ISS) and the Out-of-School Suspension (OSS) rates were relatively high at 32% and 47%, respectively. Duplicated suspension rates were even worse: many students were suspended multiple times. Conferences were not always carried out after suspensions occurred, and the underlying problems and behaviors were not meaningfully addressed in a way that lessened the likelihood of future infractions. Punishment was the only response, with no other follow-up to address ongoing issues (Brown, 2021).

By contrast, Davis Middle School's discipline philosophy was rooted in restorative methods. This approach was exemplified by the statement from Davis's principal that they "do not try to punish the bad out of kids" (Brown, 2021, p. 12). Instead, the research findings show that Davis Middle School used restorative justice coordinators to help implement a system and a culture where students were able to talk things out using restorative conferences, mediations, and an On-Campus Reflection Room (OCR) to work through problems and negative behaviors without resorting to exclusionary practices. Following the implementation of restorative practices, Davis Middle School's suspension rates were among the lowest of all middle schools in the district. Brown's (2021) study highlights the transformative nature of restorative justice compared to punitive justice, and it provides insights into the potential benefits of restorative

discipline, particularly in the post-COVID era, where social-emotional well-being and community building have received increased attention.

Data supporting restorative discipline's positive aspects over punitive discipline in schools was also found in Dhaliwal et al.'s (2023) study. This study illuminated the benefits of restorative justice from the perspective of educators, exploring their perceptions of effectively promoting positive school environments. Dhaliwal et al. (2023) used a mixed-methods research design to investigate educators' beliefs and perceptions of implementing restorative practices compared with punitive methods. The study used surveys and interviews with 363 educators working in a diverse county in California. Qualitative data was gathered from the survey responses and organized using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. According to the findings, 71.48% of respondents believed zero-tolerance policies have little to no effect on maintaining order at school. Moreover, 69.46% thought suspension had little to no use in preserving school order. These results suggest that most teachers either do not believe or only believe to a small extent that punitive discipline is necessary or valuable. When looking at beliefs about restorative practices specifically, Dhaliwal et al. (2023) found that 94.15% of survey respondents believed that restorative practices are critical to a great or moderate extent for improving student behavior. Furthermore, 92.65% reported that restorative practices are essential to a great or moderate extent for improving student learning. Educators' beliefs and perceptions within this study affirm the effectiveness of restorative practices in creating a school environment conducive to student well-being and academic success.

Research has continued to show that the harmful effects of punitive discipline extend into multiple areas and highlight the promise of restorative justice as a solution. Hulvershorn and Mulholland's (2018) study was an essay and literature review informed by education analysis

methods that put restorative practices in a broader context to include social-emotional learning in contrast to the unintended consequences of traditional punitive methods. The researchers found that punitive discipline was ineffective and, in fact, detrimental in terms of academic and social results. They also found that students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were disproportionately affected. Furthermore, they revealed that discipline policies based on punishment do not work to lessen behavioral problems. In contrast, Hulvershorn and Mulholland (2018) concluded that restorative discipline methods are a viable alternative. Based on their review, the authors argue that restorative practices allow schools to improve their exclusion rates, move toward more equitable discipline regarding race, and provide an environment where teachers can thrive and want to stay longer (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018). Integrating restorative practices with existing social-emotional learning frameworks could contribute to positive school climates, better relationships between all stakeholders, the empowerment of students, and benefit schools overall.

Tapping into the benefits of restorative discipline require staff members to believe in the merits of restorative methods and confidently utilize the practices in real-world school settings. A study by Stewart and Ezell (2022) used semi-structured, qualitative interviews of 32 staff members across five high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area to investigate how restorative discipline approaches were viewed compared to punitive practices. Member-checking was implemented, and a thematic report was discussed with a subset of respondents to further refine and calibrate the interpretations and data. The findings from the study indicated a divergence between beliefs about the benefits and usefulness of the theory of restorative discipline versus real-world implementation. Specifically, Stewart and Ezell (2022) found that most staff members believed in the ideas behind restorative discipline. Still, many indicated they had difficulty using

restorative discipline exclusively and struggled with its implementation into their work areas within the school structure. Conclusions from this study reiterated support for the use of restorative discipline practices. Still, it stressed the importance of funding and resources, buy-in, and culture change driven by leadership, proactively addressing structural issues, focusing on mental health support, and building common-sense ways of dealing with repeat offenses and unique circumstances. Although the benefits of restorative justice compared to punitive approaches are evident, some challenges are clear regarding cultural change and implementation.

### **Disparity and Equity**

Much research over the past quarter century has shown that punitive discipline methods, especially in the form of exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions, have been used inequitably with minority populations, males, and students with disabilities (Mansfield et al., 2018). Along with the disproportionate use, these punitive methods appear ineffective for behavior change and have contributed to poor outcomes concerning school performance, truancy, dropout rates, and entrance into the criminal system. Mansfield et al. (2018) conducted a case study spanning over five years at Algonquin High School in Virginia. They analyzed qualitative and quantitative data to assess the school's implementation of restorative practices and its effect on suspension rates. They looked at overall suspension rates and data specific to race/ethnicity (white and black), students with disabilities, and gender. The researchers found that suspension rates dropped for all populations examined and that disparities decreased as well. Suspension rates for white students dropped from 7% to 4%, while suspensions for black students went from 26% to 12%. Additionally, they found that 22% of students with disabilities were suspended at the beginning of the study compared with 14% four years later (compared with an overall student population suspension rate that went from 12% to 7%). Finally, the

suspension rate for males started at 15% and dropped to 9% by the end of the study. This data sheds light on the disproportionate use of exclusionary policies and suggests that restorative discipline practices show promise in lessening disparities and decreasing the overall usage of exclusions in schools.

Research continues to show the disproportionate negative impacts punitive discipline practices have on students who are already disadvantaged. Sullivan et al. (2014) used a sample of 2,750 students with disabilities across 39 schools in the Midwest to look for patterns of discipline disparities. They found that 19% of students with disabilities were suspended at least once compared with the national average suspension rate for all students of 7.4%. The researchers also found that gender, socioeconomic status, and race increased the likelihood of suspension. Students with emotional disturbance as their disability had the highest incident rate of suspension at 47%, and African-American students with disabilities had almost four times greater risk of being suspended. Sullivan et al. (2014) contended that due to the evidence that punitive, exclusionary discipline policies often lead to poor outcomes, such as disengagement and a higher dropout rate, it is imperative to look at the disparity of overusing suspensions with students with disabilities who are already at-risk for adverse academic and behavioral issues.

Operating under the ideological framework that the use of punitive methods of discipline tends to have adverse effects on students while restorative discipline practices show great promise as an alternative, Payne and Welch (2015) conducted a study to find out if the racial composition of a school impacted the likelihood that restorative discipline methods would be used as an alternative to punitive techniques. Specifically, they looked at whether schools with a higher composition rate of African-American students would lessen the likelihood of using restorative discipline practices. The researchers analyzed existing data over two years from two

separate surveys, with the final sample including 294 public secondary schools. They found that schools with higher percentages of African-American students were less likely to use restorative discipline methods. This study suggests that there is a disparity linked to racial composition in the type of discipline used in schools, a reality that may contribute to more detrimental outcomes for students in those schools.

Research shows that restorative practices can reduce school discipline disparity and equity problems while improving relationships. Gregory et al. (2016) analyzed survey data from 412 minority students and 31 teachers across two racially diverse high schools as well as discipline referral data to assess minority student attitudes toward restorative discipline and its effect on narrowing the racial discipline gap concerning the number of referrals meted out. The year before implementing a school-wide restorative discipline program, there was a significant disparity between African-American and Latino referrals for misconduct and defiance versus Asian and Caucasian referrals. The referral rate for African-American and Latino students ranged from 34%-38%, and the referral rate for Asian and Caucasian students ranged between 5%-11%. The researchers found that although disparities in referral rates remained, it was narrowed significantly after restorative practices were implemented. Moreover, they found that teachers who were perceived as using restorative discipline practices at higher levels had better relationships with their students, thereby increasing students' respect for those teachers and creating an environment that was more equitable in terms of how discipline was used. The data from this study suggests that restorative discipline methods improve student-teacher relationships with minority students while reducing the racial discipline gap, as evidenced by fewer referrals.

### **Outcomes**

Several studies over the last decade have gathered valuable data contributing to a better understanding of the outcomes of restorative discipline practices in schools. In a study by Ortega et al. (2016), semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 high school students and 25 staff members and administrators in a large, urban high school in the Southeast United States. The study assessed the outcomes of the implementation of a restorative circles program. They found that positive outcomes significantly outweighed the negative outcomes. The positive outcomes the study established were student ownership of the process, interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, improved relationships, prevention of destructive ways of engaging in conflict, meaningful dialogue, and a stronger focus on academic and social achievements. The only negative outcomes identified were frustration with a lack of honesty within the circles, disappointment that not all wanted to participate, and all parties not being physically present.

Similar findings of overwhelming positive outcomes of restorative discipline practices were found in the systematic literature review study by Lodi et al. (2021). Quantitative and qualitative data from 34 studies conducted from 2010-2021 were analyzed to determine the outcomes of the practical implementation of restorative discipline practices in schools. Lodi et al.'s (2021) review involved 22,383 participants from 900 schools. The researchers found overwhelmingly positive outcomes in a variety of areas: better management of discipline issues, more rule-following behavior, reductions in bullying and school violence, better alternative zero-tolerance policies, more positive conflict management between a variety of stakeholders, healthier behaviors, increased psychological well-being, positive interpersonal relationships, less racial inequity, lower rates of discipline disparity related to socioeconomic status, more equitable treatment of gender, positive school climate, better school safety, higher academic outcomes, lower absenteeism, and the promotion of higher levels of social and emotional awareness. In

other words, the support for a shift to restorative discipline practices is vast and encompasses multiple positively impacted areas. Finally, Lodi et al.'s (2021) study suggests that restorative discipline can be a proactive deterrent to negative behavior and outcomes as well as a discipline response.

The positive outcomes of changing from a punitive discipline philosophy to restorative discipline can be felt by both students and staff. Garnett et al. (2022) conducted a mixed methods case study with 17 staff members and 107 students from an urban school in the Northeast United States to assess the outcomes and experiences of students and staff participating in the first year of implementing restorative discipline using community building circles. According to their findings, student and staff responses indicated positive results concerning improved relationships, better self-awareness, more social awareness, increased responsibility, and better decision-making. The study listed student participation, time constraints, and having enough staff as limiting factors. Overall, students and staff reported positive outcomes from the shift to restorative discipline.

Similar findings were revealed by Reimer (2020) in a qualitative case study on how a comprehensive restorative discipline program impacted students' ability to learn skills to resolve conflicts in a school setting. The researcher also assessed the students' perceptions of their lives in terms of a "sense of coherence" defined by feelings of life being manageable, comprehensible, and meaningful. Reimer's (2020) study focused on a Canadian public school with 350 students from 40 different home countries. Many of the students were refugees and were experiencing trauma. Reimer (2020) found that students formed trusting relationships, worked collectively to solve disputes respectfully, felt their voices were heard, and collectively perceived their lives as manageable, comprehensible, and meaningful. These findings were attributable to the restorative

discipline commitment made by the school and the restorative circles that formed the foundation of this shift in philosophy.

Faculty members and administrators are noticing a wide array of benefits of restorative discipline. In a study by Payne and Welch (2018), survey data from teachers and administrators from 1,287 public, private, and Catholic schools were examined to look at the effect of school conditions on restorative discipline use and its outcomes. They found that schools using restorative discipline practices had improved outcomes and fewer disparities in the equitable application of discipline. Furthermore, the researchers stated that a reduction in repeat offenses and increased academic achievement are important promising outcomes from the use of restorative discipline methods when compared with punitive practices.

### **Implementation**

Moving away from engrained punitive methods of discipline to restorative justice practices in schools is an endeavor that requires careful planning specific to the needs of the school and community, fidelity to best practices, effective leadership to promote staff buy-in, focused professional development, and long-term strategic commitment (Gregory & Evans, 2020). Although targeted restorative discipline practices have been successfully used in isolation for specific goals, research has demonstrated that whole-school systems combined with multi-tiered support systems elicit the best student outcomes (Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Successful implementation of restorative discipline requires strategic planning and work in multiple areas. In the study by Abdou et al. (2023), an applied case study was conducted in five middle schools across two districts in Southern California to examine their multi-site school-wide restorative justice implementation and ascertain recommendations for future best practices for similar program implementations. They found that commitment at the highest levels of

school leadership to change policies, hire staff, establish expert leadership teams, secure funding, and carve out appropriate amounts of time for professional learning and implementation is crucial to the success of the programmatic change. The researchers also found that training staff to learn about restorative justice, change attitudes on discipline, and initiate new skills is an essential early step to creating foundational change and a shift in thinking away from a punitive philosophy. Moreover, the research revealed the need to provide learning and training for students to understand and utilize the new restorative processes. Finally, they learned that data monitoring systems needed to be in place to ongoingly assess how students and staff were generalizing new skills, procedures, and attitudes.

Another study that examined best practices for whole-school implementation was conducted by Gonzalez et al. (2019). This multi-year qualitative case study spanned seven years of Alliance High School (charter school) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Similar to the study by Abdou et al. (2023), the researchers found that monetary and human investments were necessary and that commitment by school leadership was critical for whole-school change. They also found that integrating restorative justice practices directly into their curriculum and classes within the multi-tiered structure allowed all students to feel a part of a greater community and access the restorative philosophy at their varying levels of need. Furthermore, they found that student-led restorative methods were instrumental in creating shared norms and helping students feel empowered, engaged, and safe. Finally, they found that it is vital for schools to have the courage to challenge and change engrained organizational structures that do not support restorative discipline practices and goals. In other words, shifting structures and thinking toward restorative beliefs and practices takes a strong commitment and time.

Research on restorative discipline continues to shed light on best practices for implementation. In the double-blind peer-reviewed policy brief by Gregory and Evans (2020), prior research on restorative justice and its implementation in schools was analyzed and synthesized to summarize current findings and make recommendations for best practices for implementation. Their findings recommended that schools adopt practices that are comprehensive, committed to equity, and align with the core principles of restorative justice. Moreover, they suggested that schools implement restorative discipline in ways that work with the individual needs of each school, evolve as necessary, are strategic and organized, and are focused on long-term sustainability supported by ongoing professional development. Finally, the researchers recommended that implementation designs and methods be evaluated for fidelity to the core principles of restorative justice over the long term (3-5 years minimum). These policy recommendations suggest that a long-term commitment to restorative justice values that is well-planned and continually assessed will best serve students.

Real-world examples of restorative practices implementation continue to show useful strategies and points of emphasis. In the case study by Weaver and Swank (2020), a middle school of about 1,000 students in the southeastern United States implementing restorative justice discipline was examined for five months. Five themes emerged from their research. The first was a "different approach" that described the need for administrators and teachers to commit to trying something new. The second theme was a full commitment to restorative justice through a respect agreement and letter writing. The respect agreement was a contract between teachers and students to create a classroom culture centered on mutual respect. Letter writing became a practice format for students to begin to learn how to apologize and make things right. The third theme was relationships, including creating a community with accountability for all. The fourth

theme was meaningful consequences that were focused on helping kids do the right thing or make natural consequences fit the behavior. Finally, the fifth theme was establishing clear expectations from the beginning of the school year. These themes created a systematic way of setting the tone and changing the mindset of the school collectively to enact the change to restorative discipline practices.

Training teachers effectively is critical to the successful implementation of a restorative discipline structure. Mayworm et al.'s (2016) study reviewed 19 peer-reviewed studies about restorative discipline implementation in schools to ascertain how best to involve and train teachers in the process. They found that a professional development model with multiple tiers and a targeted consultation structure to work with restorative justice experts for teachers was an overlooked yet important aspect of the successful implementation of restorative discipline. They also found that professional development should focus on content (restorative methods), allow time for active learning where teachers use information in real-time, provide training that links learning to belief systems, encompass a minimum of 20 hours of development spread out over at least one semester, and give opportunities for teachers in the same departments or who work together a significant amount of time to be able to collaborate in their learning. Furthermore, the researchers found that professional development on restorative discipline, which was given on only one day and not used in staff members' daily work, was ineffective. Finally, they determined that follow-up support for teachers where teachers were given a voice was critical if new learning and belief systems were going to continue to be used. In other words, ongoing, purposeful, multi-tiered, and strategic professional development with permanent support structures for teachers is important for implementing a new restorative discipline program.

School leadership's impact on implementing restorative discipline in school settings is considerable and should not be overlooked. For example, Bruhn (2020) studied two leaders through interviews and observations of the leaders themselves, teachers, and students to observe their efforts to change from punitive discipline to restorative discipline at their respective schools. Bruhn (2020) found that having an expert coordinator for restorative methods and practices was critical to implementation. The researcher also found that restorative justice should not be limited to discipline if it is to take hold: it must be put into all aspects of school and decision-making. Moreover, it was found that efforts to lessen the racial gap and disparities in discipline practices should be openly discussed to combat underlying attitudes and biases that some might have. Furthermore, it was found that implementation is best when all students, staff, and administrators participate in the restorative practices to form relationships and interactions necessary for a restorative culture to take hold and flourish. Finally, it was found that leadership should not be authoritarian: if a restorative justice culture is the goal, leadership practices that work the best are rooted in restraint, persistence, and respect.

Implementing a restorative justice culture is difficult and multi-faceted, but being aware of possible challenges and proactively engaging with people can help create an atmosphere conducive to success. In the study by Gilzene (2021), an eight-month case study was conducted to examine the implementation process of a high school with 1,400 students to ascertain best practices and challenges that arise through implementing a restorative discipline model from a prior punitive structure. Gilzene (2021) found several challenges. Some staff members felt uncomfortable being on equal footing with students, some felt resolving issues took too much time, there were disagreements regarding whether school resource officers should be involved in restorative methods, they found some teachers resisted change due to past unsuccessful trials,

others believed there was no need for change, and some disagreed with the change in power and authority structure. The researcher found that professional development specific to restorative justice that allows for teacher concerns and opinions to be heard helped combat negativity. Finally, it was found that school-wide, open conversations where people did not fear speaking out about issues that warranted changes were critical to creating buy-in from the staff. In other words, moving from punitive discipline to restorative discipline in schools is complex, involves strategic planning, and takes time. Staff members must feel heard and engaged in the process to create buy-in.

### **School Profile**

#### **Community Characteristics**

Cedar Falls, Iowa, is located in the northeast part of the state within Black Hawk County near the Cedar River. The city is almost 30 square miles in rural and suburban neighborhoods, is home to 40,388 residents, and continues growing yearly. Cedar Falls is home to the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), the third largest university in Iowa; UNI is vital to the city's economy and cultural activities. As some of the largest employers in the city, John Deere, Tyson Foods, and Mercy One contribute to the growing economy. The town of Cedar Falls has an ever-growing ethnic and racial population; however, almost 90% of Cedar Falls' citizens identify as white.

#### **School District Characteristics**

The Cedar Falls Community School District serves over 6,000 K-12 students in its seven elementary buildings, two junior highs, one alternative program, and one high school. The secondary enrollment numbers include over 2,600 students between the two junior high schools and the high school building. The free and reduced lunch population is 21% compared with the state average of 33% (Public School Review). Students with IEPs range from 11-14% in the

secondary buildings, and English language learners make up 1-2% of the students. The Cedar Falls School district is neither diverse nor low economically compared to state averages.

According to Public School Review, the overall minority enrollment for the entire district is 16% of the student body (majority Black and Asian), which is lower than the Iowa state average of 24% (majority Hispanic). For Cedar Falls High School specifically, 84% are Caucasian, 5% identify as two or more races, 4% are African American, 4% are Asian, and 3% identify as Hispanic (Public School Review). All three buildings' talented and gifted student population ranges from 11-16 %, and over half of the Cedar Falls Community School District teachers hold a master's degree. According to the most recent district enrollment data, the district has seen a steady trend of increasing enrollment over the past decade.

### **Student Performance**

Among the top 25 school districts in the state, Cedar Falls was ranked second, with a graduation rate of 93.01% in 2021. According to the Iowa School Performance Profiles, Cedar Falls High School was ranked commendable with an overall score of 55.82 compared to the state average of 54.65 in meeting accountability measures required under ESSA. Cedar Falls High School students scored above the state average in reading and mathematics on state assessments in 2022. The 2021 composite ACT score was 24.6, which was higher than the state of Iowa's composite score (21.8) and the national composite score (20.8). All of the schools in the district had an average daily attendance of 95.2% compared to the state average of 92.8%. Additionally, 85% of secondary pupils participated in extracurricular activities.

### **Parent Involvement**

The Cedar Falls Community School district uses PowerSchool's learning management system to post and share academic information with parents about their child's proficiency in

given standards. Each building publishes a monthly newsletter for parents with current news and upcoming events. PATT (Parents and Teachers Together), a parent group that promotes school spirit and aids students, parents, and teachers in the educational process, serves the secondary buildings. Secondary conferences are held twice during the school year and offer in-person and virtual scheduling times for parents. Each building has a solid social media presence and updates its digital platforms with current classroom information and happenings.

### **School Mission and Vision**

The Cedar Falls Community Schools mission statement is "Educating each student to be a lifelong learner and a caring, responsible citizen" (Cedar Falls Community School District, 2023). The vision statement is "Every student, every day" (Cedar Falls Community School District, 2023). The district describes its efforts as providing students with a high-quality education by embracing change as a reflection of the world students will encounter in their lifelong learning. There is a strong emphasis on college and career readiness, prioritizing the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills to ensure students' preparedness for the future. Additionally, the Cedar Falls Community School district cultivates well-rounded individuals by offering various opportunities for academic excellence, artistic expression, athletic achievements, and participation in multiple activities.

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

Students are assessed through the ISASP (Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress) each spring, and each leadership team in the secondary buildings sets learning goals based on those results. The current SMART goal for academics is that by May of 2023, 82% of 3rd-11th grade students will be proficient in or advanced proficient in reading and math as measured by the ISASP assessments. The current culture goal established for secondary

buildings is that by May 2023, 82% of students in grades 2-10 will be identified as Not At Risk as indicated by Spring 2023 MySAEBRS (a social, academic, emotions behavior risk screener). The professional development SMART goal is that by May 2023, 100% of the buildings will effectively use the PLC look-for document with 100% of collaborative teams to guide the collaborative process to be more effective and productive.

### **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

The Cedar Falls Community School District has selected Universal Design for Learning as the framework for instruction. This framework removes any barriers to learning, allows multiple avenues of sharing knowledge, and engages students in various modalities in their learning. Teachers participate in learning walks and use the UDL framework to share teaching strategies and brainstorm innovative ways to deliver instruction.

The Cedar Falls Community School District devotes every Monday morning to the secondary PLC (Professional Learning Communities) processes for content alike teams. The PLC process is based on the belief that continuous, job-embedded learning for educators plays a vital role in enhancing student learning. Within this collaborative framework, teachers work to improve student learning, find areas of improvement, and engage in collective inquiry to identify best practices that effectively address current needs. A significant focus for PLC work has been to align instruction to the given standards in a content area, create common formative and summative assessments, and create a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all students.

### **Professional Development**

The Cedar Falls Community School District reserves six full days for professional development throughout the academic year in addition to the embedded learning that takes place during PLC time. These days include unit planning, planning for the UDL framework,

technology, and restorative practices work. Teachers work together to create materials that improve instruction and student outcomes within their PLC content teams.

### **Needs Assessment**

The secondary schools in the Cedar Falls Community School District need to improve their student discipline practices. The current prescriptive punitive discipline practices that have been in place result in numerous suspensions (in and out of school), lost learning time for individual students, less connectedness to others, quantitative and qualitative trends of inequity for students of color and students with disabilities, and failure to address the core behavioral issues leading to the punitive action or provide opportunities for redress and repair. Furthermore, the existing discipline methods likely lead to higher recidivism, negatively impact students' relationships with adult staff members, cause learning gaps due to missed instructional time, create problems with attendance and engagement due to some students' negative perceptions of culture and the enforcement of rules, and lead to inconsistencies in the application of boundaries, expectations, and consequences. All of these factors negatively impact the overall culture and climate in the district and may be detrimental to student learning, growth, and achievement.

Although the Cedar Falls Community School District has begun work to implement restorative justice methods as a viable alternative to its current discipline practices, the district's efforts have been inconsistent and poorly understood by staff. The district continues to operate with discipline methods where detentions and suspensions are the standard responses to behavioral issues, and even then, enforcement varies between buildings. Moreover, for students who are suspended out of school or sent to the Intervention Center to serve their suspensions, there are few, if any, re-entry conversations or proactive measures in place aside from the threat of further suspension to curb or deter future infractions or delve deeper into the causes of the

behavior. Therefore, there is a need to fully commit to a restorative justice philosophy of discipline to ameliorate the issues that come from the prescriptive, punitive philosophy that has been in place. Implementing a restorative discipline philosophy requires strategic, targeted planning to create buy-in, a long-term, systematic plan for professional development to train all staff members in restorative methods, leadership that is supportive of the change, and ongoing assessment and consultation during the implementation process.

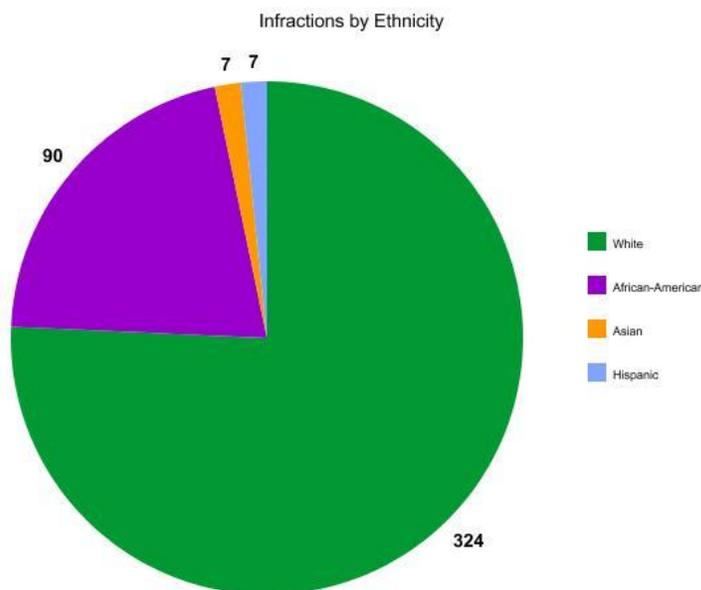
**School Data and Analysis**

**Data Summary**

Cedar Falls Community Secondary Schools collectively had 428 recorded student infractions of school rules as reported by principals in the Decision Ed database. Figure 1 displays the breakdown of students by ethnicity that had violations in the 2022-2023 school year. Notably, African-American students make up 21% of total infractions even though the percentage of African-American students ranges from 3.9% to 6% in the secondary buildings.

**Figure 1**

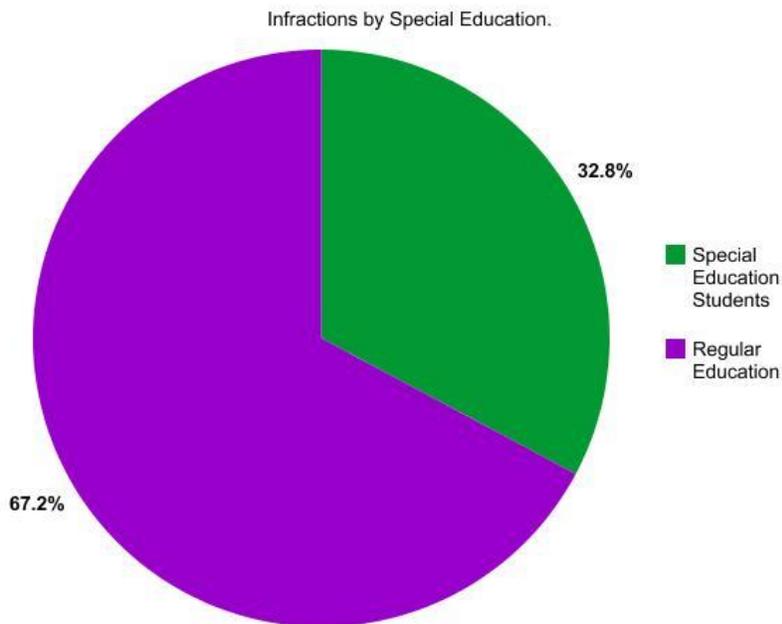
*Infractions by Ethnicity for Secondary Schools 2022-2023*



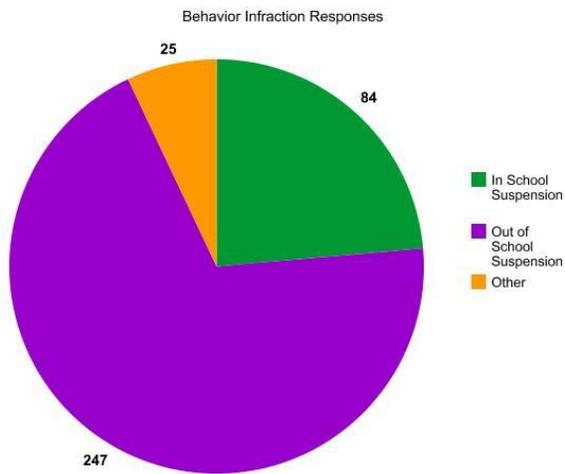
Students requiring special education services comprised 32.8% of all infractions, which amounts to almost a third of all violations for the 2022-2023 school year (see Figure 2). For reference, the students requiring special education services range from 11.4% to 14% of the total population of students in secondary buildings in the Cedar Falls Community Schools.

**Figure 2**

*Infractions by Special Education Students in Secondary Schools 2022-2023*



Secondary administrators' responses to behavior infractions where formal actions were taken and recorded are shown in Figure 3 and conclusively demonstrate the use of zero-tolerance practices. Students removed from the academic setting through out-of-school suspensions accounted for almost 70% of administrative responses. When in-school suspensions were added in, nearly 92% of all administrative responses to behavioral incidents resulted in a loss of learning time.

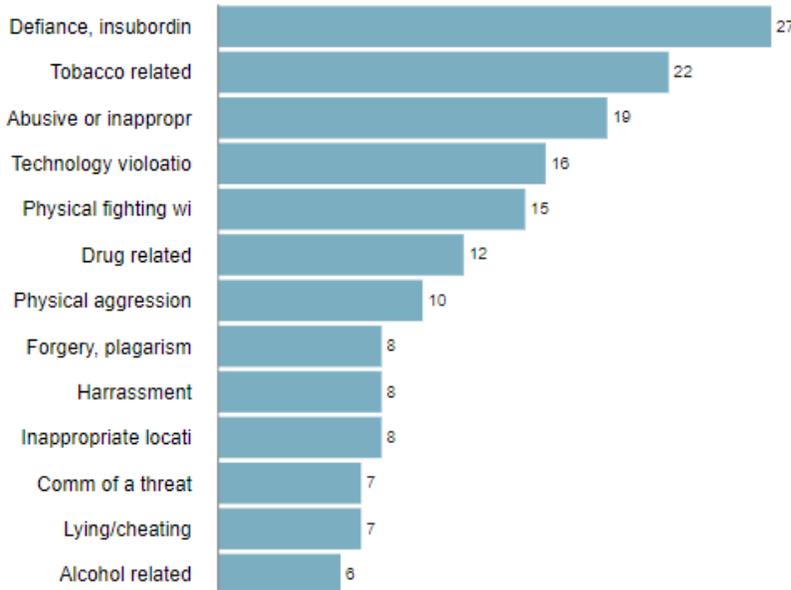
**Figure 3***Infraction Responses*

Further examination into the types of behavior violations students struggled with included many behaviors related to the relationships within the building. Figure 4 shows that defiance and insubordination were the most reported infraction for high school students during the 2022-2023 school year, and abusive and inappropriate language was the third most common offense. Analysis of the infraction data shows that 52.12% of all violations fall under the realm of relationships (defiance/insubordination, abusive/inappropriate language, physical fighting, physical aggression, harassment, and communication of a threat).

**Figure 4**

*Top 10 Infractions at the High School*

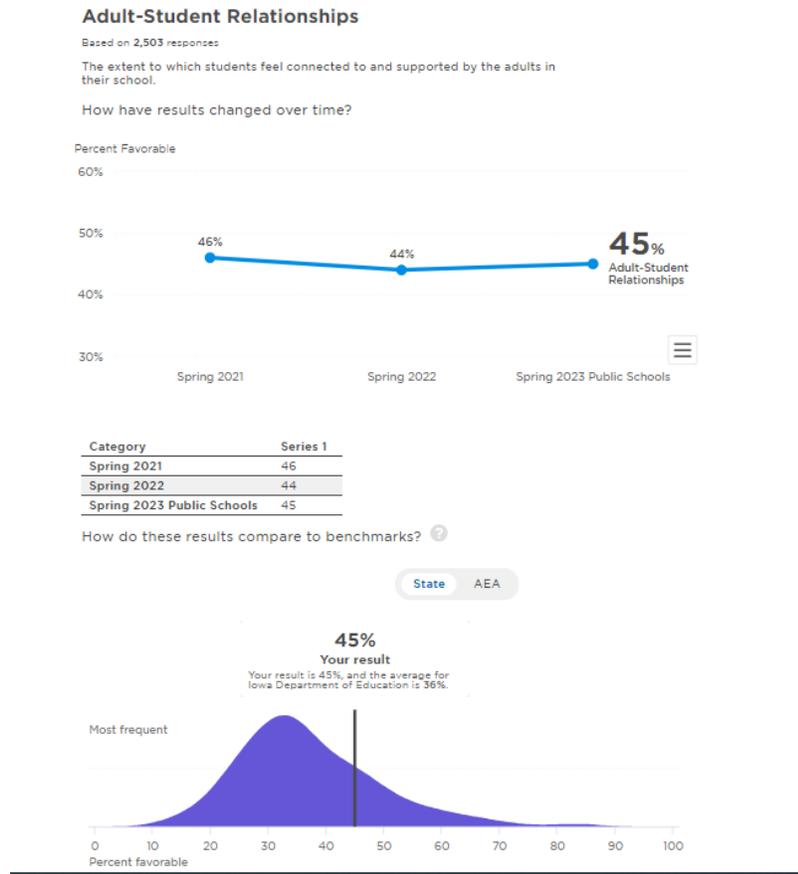
Current Year Top 10 Infraction Types



The Cedar Falls Community School District collected qualitative data regarding students' opinions in various areas through the student portion of the spring of 2023 Public Schools Conditions for Learning survey. Students assessed their relationships with adults in the school setting and how connected they felt to their teachers. Less than half of the secondary students view their relationships with teachers favorably, and there has been no movement from this number since the spring of 2021 (see Figure 5). Additionally, data shows that 15% of students do not believe adults treat students respectfully in Cedar Falls Secondary Schools (see Figure 6).

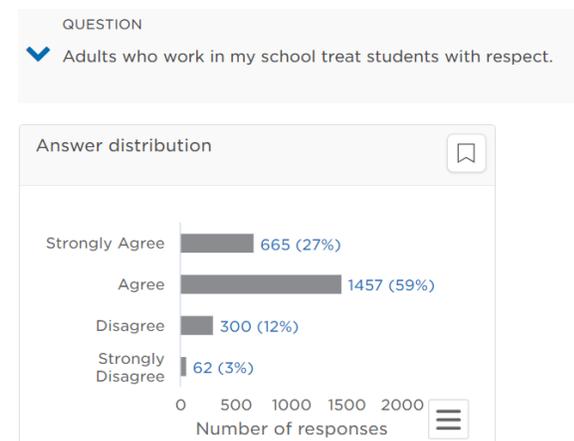
**Figure 5**

*Adult-Student Relationships*



**Figure 6**

*Student Responses to Adults' Respect of Students*



Secondary students were also surveyed about their perceptions of the clarity of school rules and how consistently teachers enforced school policies. Of these students, 43% had less than favorable responses to understanding the school policies and how teachers were uniformly implementing consequences (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Boundaries & Expectations*



Figure 8 shows that when secondary students were asked about their perceptions of physical safety in school, there was a dramatic drop in the number of students who reported feeling safe on school grounds from the spring of 2021 (62%) to the spring of 2023 (53%). This downward trend is most evident in specific subgroups of students. The students who gave the most negative responses were those who qualified for free/reduced lunch, students who were homeless, and the African-American and Latino minority populations (see Figure 9).

**Figure 8**

*Physical Safety*

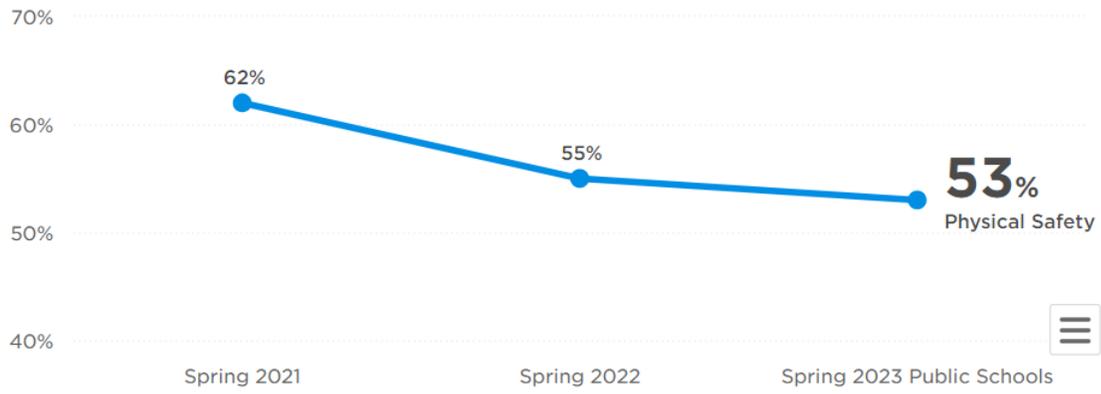
**Physical Safety**

Based on **2,503** responses

Student safety while on school grounds.

How have results changed over time?

Percent Favorable



**Figure 9**

*Responses by Subgroups*

Group Name	Group Size	Adult-Student Relationships	Boundaries and Expectations	Emotional Safety	Physical Safety	Student-Student Relationships
All respondents	2,503	45%	43%	27%	53%	44%
11	346	-4	-10	+4	+6	-4
12	211	0	-8	+5	+14	+1
<b>Student Race</b>						
Asian	70	+4	0	+14	+8	-5
Black or African American	105	-10	-7	-10	-24	-14
Hispanic/Latino	66	-11	-13	0	-1	-9
Multiracial	126	+3	+11	+1	-2	0
White	2,124	0	-1	0	0	+1
Confidentiality protected: N...	12	+37	+24	+9	+29	+11
<b>Student Free/Reduced Lunch</b>						
No	1,863	0	-1	+2	+3	+2
Yes	640	+1	0	-7	-9	-6
<b>Student Homelessness</b>						
No	2,491	0	0	0	0	0
Yes	12	0	+7	-9	-20	-8
<b>Student IEP</b>						
No	2,209	-1	0	+1	+1	0
Yes	294	+9	-1	-9	-7	0

**Weaknesses**

The data suggests weaknesses in the district's secondary climate and how discipline is implemented. One finding was that African-American students were disproportionately disciplined with school suspensions compared to other student populations. Furthermore, these students responded much more negatively to the Conditions of Learning survey overall, with deficits in all areas, including Adult-Student Relations, Boundaries and Expectations, Emotional Safety, Physical Safety, and Student-Student Relationships.

Another concern is the number of students with IEPs who receive punitive punishment that removes them from valuable learning time and access to the services they need to succeed. These students are the most at risk and need the most support within the least restrictive learning environment.

Additionally, using primarily punitive consequences in Cedar Falls Secondary Schools does not facilitate problem-solving with the students on the root cause of the behavior or create communication that can teach more appropriate actions to negate future infractions. Furthermore, the most common offenses are tied to personal relations, and using punitive consequences hurts culture, relationships, and the overall climate.

**Strengths**

There are areas of strength in the district, as indicated by the Conditions of Learning survey responses from 2023. One positive indicator is that the secondary students at Cedar Falls High School averaged much higher in positive relationships with school adults at 46% versus the state average of 36% (see Figure 5 above). Additionally, there is a small growth in the student perception of the clarity of rules and enforcement from the spring of 2021 at 40% to 43% in the spring of 2023 (see Figure 7 above). Lastly, specific subgroups of respondents had positive

responses. Students with IEPs showed significant growth in Adult-Student Relationships, and multi-racial students exhibited substantial gains in Clarifying Boundaries and Expectations.

### **Assessment Needs**

The data compiled and analyzed through The Conditions of Learning survey and the district Decision Ed database all shed light on some significant trends within the Cedar Falls Community Secondary Schools; however, additional information could help support solutions to the weaknesses and accentuate strengths. Information that would be beneficial to collect could include the recidivism rate for behavior infractions, students' opinions about the discipline process, and specific ideas and suggestions from the subgroups who have felt targeted. Other data of equal importance would focus on what staff opinions regarding the particular impact of the lost instructional time has on individual students, implications of the current discipline methods, communication of discipline responses, and the impact of punitive measures on student-staff relationships. Gaining insight into student and staff perceptions are critical to building a more proactive, equitable discipline process that promotes buy-in, mandates communication, encourages repair, and restores the offenders' status.

### **Action Plan**

#### **Strategies and Themes**

After carefully reviewing the relevant research and literature, several strategies and themes emerged that will help the Cedar Falls Community School District improve its discipline practices by implementing a restorative discipline philosophy. Initially, the administration must fully commit to a restorative practices discipline system at the district and building levels (Abdou et al., 2023). According to Gregory and Evans (2020), this commitment should align fully with restorative justice values and be comprehensive by including policies, hiring practices, staff

behaviors, decision-making, and curriculum at all levels. The commitment should also disrupt any systems and attitudes that promote equity gaps. Securing and allocating funding must be part of the equation.

Moreover, hiring an expert coordinator in restorative discipline is critical to oversee the process and help with implementation. Next, the implementation approach needs to be decided and carefully planned (Bruhn, 2020). A whole-school approach merged with the existing Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is preferential to models that only target specific school goals because these models do not allow all to access and generalize restorative techniques and values (Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Along with committing to restorative discipline and making decisions on the comprehensive model, securing buy-in and involving all stakeholders (administration, staff, students, and community) through relationship building, persistence, and the modeling of restorative justice is critical for creating momentum and successful implementation (Bruhn, 2020). According to Bruhn (2020), "to truly upend a punitive paradigm, restorative justice needs to seep into every decision and interaction, starting with the school leaders" (p.22). In conjunction with creating a culture rooted in restorative philosophy through commitment, decision-making, and language, choosing the restorative methods that work for the school's individual needs and structures is crucial. These specific structures and techniques (such as respect agreements) must be strategically embedded into classrooms, administrative procedures, professional learning communities, and meetings (Weaver & Swank, 2020).

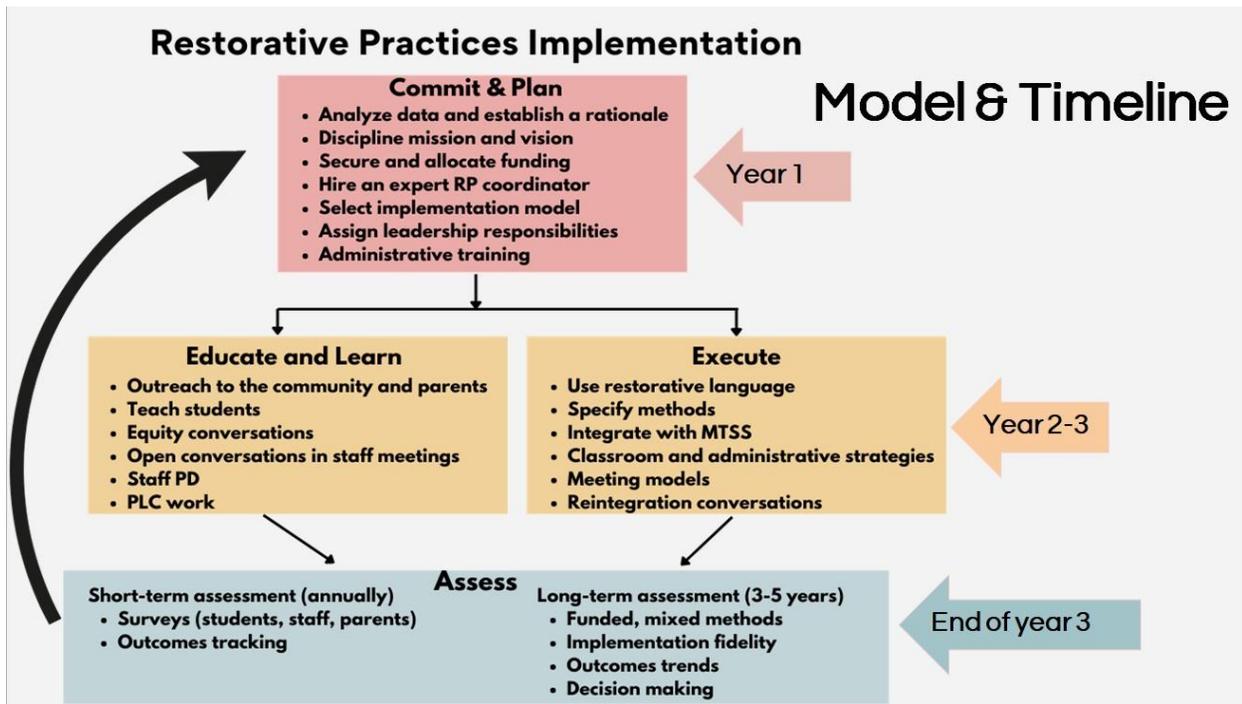
One of the biggest keys to successfully implementing restorative practices is having a multi-tiered professional development model with a targeted consultation structure for experts to work with teachers (Mayworm et al., 2016). Professional development must be focused on

content, allot time for teachers to actively learn and use restorative strategies, and allow for ongoing opportunities for collaboration. The district needs to commit to a minimum of 20 hours of professional development specific to restorative justice discipline and methods, and this should be planned over at least one semester because research shows that one day of professional development does not work. Follow-up support for staff where members can voice their concerns and opinions is critical. Similarly, Gilzene (2021) encourages open conversations with the entire faculty without fear of reprisal to gain support, answer questions, and suppress negativity.

Finally, existing data and literature suggest that building ways to assess progress consistently is imperative. Abdou et al. (2023) encourage seeking out targeted data monitoring methods and models that fit a school's individual goals and unique needs and working with a restorative justice specialist to implement workable systems to elicit valuable data for evaluation and improvement. Furthermore, Gregory and Evans (2020) emphasized the importance of waiting at least 3-5 years before using funded evaluations. They found that evaluators should focus on the fidelity of implementing restorative justice methods and outcomes by using holistic, mixed assessments to ascertain the most accurate appraisals and suggestions for growth.

### **Steps to Solve the Problem**

The existing research and literature consistently urge a specific and targeted implementation strategy. The Cedar Falls Community School District will need to use the following phases and steps to successfully enact a new restorative discipline philosophy to serve better its students, staff, and the Cedar Falls community. These phases and steps are illustrated in Figure 10 and defined below:

**Figure 10***Restorative Practices Implementation Model**Commit and Plan*

1. Data will be gathered, organized, and analyzed at the district level to establish a need and provide a rationale for change.
2. A discipline practices mission and vision will be created that is anchored in restorative justice.
3. Funding will be secured through grants and established funds and allocated to restorative practices implementation.
4. An expert restorative practices coordinator will be hired to consult and oversee the implementation process.

5. A whole-school restorative methods implementation model will be chosen based on the district's individual characteristics, needs, and goals.
6. Responsibilities will be assigned to administrators, and leadership teams consisting of teachers and administrators will be established to provide stability and continuity.
7. Student leadership teams will be formed to gather input, receive training, and plan presentations for future outreach and education.
8. Administrators will receive training on the benefits of restorative methods, how to use restorative practices, and how to establish a culture that adheres to the restorative justice philosophy. They will also receive training on the implementation plan.
9. Existing organizational structures, policies, and attitudes will be evaluated. Anything not conducive to integrating restorative practices will be challenged and changed.

### *Educate and Learn*

1. A plan for community outreach will be established and executed to gain support for the restorative discipline initiative.
2. Communication with parents regarding restorative principles, methods, and expectations will be sent through newsletters and informational meetings.
3. Students will be taught and trained on restorative discipline expectations, methods, and dialogue through individual class time, intervention time, assemblies, and student leadership teams.
4. Conversations surrounding equity (racial, gender, and disabilities) and the ways restorative practices can reduce gaps will be facilitated with staff and students.
5. Open conversations regarding the change to restorative discipline will occur repeatedly in staff meetings that allow for faculty to voice concerns and opinions without fear of

reprisal. This openness will serve as an example of conducting dialogue in a restorative setting and reducing negative feelings among staff.

6. Staff professional development will be carefully planned, be multi-tiered, teach restorative methods, give adequate work time, require collaboration, and encompass 20 hours of training over multiple days and semesters.

### ***Execute***

1. Restorative language will be taught and used across the district in all settings.
2. Specific restorative methods will be chosen and used in all buildings. Relationship building, encouraging learning from mistakes, repairing harm, and various forms of restorative circles will be the cornerstones.
3. District and building administrators will ensure restorative practices will fit and are fully integrated into the proper areas within the existing MTSS structure.
4. Multiple restorative techniques will be embedded into classrooms. Respect agreements will be used in all classrooms at the beginning of the year to establish a positive culture. Time for relationship-building will be allotted in multiple ways. Expectations will be clearly delineated, and the therapeutic procedures for handling misbehavior, conflicts, and disputes will be taught and modeled.
5. Administrators will use restorative conversations and techniques to handle misbehavior and communicate effectively with parents, teachers, and students to resolve conflicts promptly.
6. All meetings involving discipline or disputes will use restorative practices.

7. After any suspension (in or out of school), reintegration conversations will occur with students, parents, and teachers before re-entry into the classroom to ensure a smoother transition.

### ***Assess***

1. Annual assessment of restorative discipline practices and methods will be quantitative and qualitative. Staff, students, and parents will be surveyed each spring regarding their experiences, attitudes, opinions, and suggestions regarding restorative discipline implementation.
2. Annual tracking of outcomes related to discipline data will be maintained.
3. Every 3-5 years, a funded mixed-methods assessment will occur to assess implementation fidelity and analyze trends in discipline outcomes.
4. A joint committee of administrators and teachers will be established to make suggestions based on the data from the funded mixed-methods assessment.

## **Implementation of School Improvement Plan**

### **Timeline**

Although the conversion to restorative discipline practices is continual due to alterations and enhancements made after assessments, staff and administrative turnover, changing needs of the district, demographic shifts, and world events such as the recent pandemic, this particular improvement plan cycle will span three years. Year one will be devoted to the commit and plan phase. In that year, school leaders and administrators will complete the work that will create the foundation for change by iterating a total commitment and vision to a system based on restorative justice, hiring expertise in the field, reorganizing its financial allocations, selecting a

model, and making sure all leadership, administrative, and outreach aspects are ready and in place.

Year two will usher in the educate and learn phase as well as the execution phase. In the educate and learn phase, the goals will be to create buy-in and provide learning opportunities for all stakeholders, including students, parents, staff, and the community. This phase will include a community outreach plan, informational meetings for parents, a newsletter, professional development training for staff, work in PLCs, presentations by student leadership teams, and conversations about improving equity. Simultaneously, the execution phase will mandate the real-time use of restorative language, classroom methods, administrative practices, meeting facilitation strategies, and re-entry conversations based on restorative philosophies.

Finally, year three will repeat year two with the addition of the assessment phase in the spring. Although there will be ongoing assessments each year in the form of student, parent, and staff surveys as well as continuous tracking of discipline outcomes, at the end of year three, a funded mixed-methods, professional assessment will be conducted to assess the district's fidelity to implementing restorative justice practices and outcomes trends. The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the evaluation will be used at the end of the year to make decisions regarding the following steps, adaptations, or modifications to the implementation process.

### **Resources**

Successful implementation of a whole-school restorative discipline system will take many capital and human resources. The district must secure funding for a restorative practices coordinator, professional development, learning materials, and training for administrators and leadership teams. Furthermore, the funded, mixed methods assessment must be secured and

purchased. Some of the budget will come from existing monies, but others will come from grants.

## **Staff Responsibilities**

### ***District Leaders and Building Administrators***

District and building-level school leaders will play vital roles throughout the implementation process. Their work in the first year will be critical to providing a solid, consistent foundation and creating positive momentum through their words, actions, and attitudes. Bruhn (2020) said, "Ultimately, the leaders exhibited restraint, persistence, and respect, qualities that served as the basis for meaningful relationships with students and teachers" (p. 1). Setting the stage for a restorative culture through relationship-building with all stakeholders will be among the most important tasks for leaders. Administrative leadership should not be authoritarian; whatever tone they set will permeate the organization and the culture.

There will be many vital administrative roles. The superintendent must have a vocal, physical presence within the district and the community. The communications director will be responsible for disseminating program information and maintaining multi-media avenues for communicating with the parents and public about restorative justice. The assistant director of instructional services will need to work with the restorative practices coordinator and the director of student services to set up leadership teams, provide training for administrators, and plan district-wide professional development. The chief financial officer will need to work with the district cabinet and the school board to secure and allocate funding and work with the Cedar Falls Schools Foundation to raise money and secure grants. The human resources director will hire an expert restorative practices (RP) coordinator and include restorative discipline conversations and considerations in future hiring practices. Building principles must train and

work with the RP coordinator and district-level leaders for consistent implementation and ensure that the methods fit the district's current MTSS framework. Finally, the building principals must also provide positive modeling of a restorative culture in their respective buildings with everyone whom they interact.

### ***Restorative Practices (RP) Coordinator***

Like the district and building leaders, the RP coordinator's role will be particularly crucial in the early stages of implementation. Early in the process, they will work with district and building administrators. After year one, their work will shift to the building level. The RP coordinator will provide the expertise to help leaders lay out a framework and a vision for a thriving restorative discipline culture. The coordinator will initially work with district leaders and building administrators to help organize the implementation process and ensure fidelity to restorative principles and equity. In years two and three, the RP coordinator will shift to working with building leadership teams to help with daily implementation. Subsequently, the coordinator will continue to assist with professional development planning and problem-solving at the district level.

### ***Teachers***

Teachers will play the critical role of advancing the district goals on the ground in real time, and many will also be on leadership teams. All teachers will be expected to delve into professional learning and work to understand and use restorative practices. Relationship building, promoting equity, and providing a safe environment will be critical. Furthermore, using restorative methods to handle misbehavior, provide accountability, repair harm, and preserve dignity will be paramount. Teachers must commit to teaching academic subjects while

also teaching students how to interact positively with one another, handle adversity, be a positive part of a classroom, and build community.

### ***Support Staff and Other Personnel***

Support staff and other district personnel will significantly affect the restorative culture in the district through their daily interactions with students, staff, and visitors. Regardless of role, all district staff will have in-service training on restorative culture, including restorative language, relationship building, handling student misbehavior, dealing with personal disputes, and protocols.

### **Data Collection and Monitoring**

Quantitative and qualitative data will be gathered and analyzed for reflection and decision-making in the short and long terms. Quantitative discipline outcome data (suspensions, office referrals, responses, equity, etc.) will be gathered and put into the Decision Ed. Database. This ongoing data collection will be available for short- and long-term analysis. Furthermore, student, parent, and teacher surveys will be sent annually via Google Forms to gather qualitative data (opinions, experiences, and suggestions) regarding the district's restorative discipline practices and implementation. Every three years, a professional, funded, mixed-methods assessment will be conducted district-wide to assess the district's fidelity to restorative values and methods as well as outcomes resulting from implementation. Long-term trends will be evaluated for decision-making purposes.

### **Barriers and Challenges**

With any culture change, there will be challenges and barriers to overcome. Changing from a punitive discipline structure to a framework built on restorative principles will not be easy. Along with the typical obstacles of time, money, and long-term commitment, the

transformation from a traditional punitive discipline philosophy to a restorative discipline culture asks much of everyone within the district and community. Changing any culture that involves a lot of people with diverse views and backgrounds requires fortitude. From a climate and culture perspective, long-held views of discipline, staff members who may resist change, a history of hasty, unsuccessful reforms, and embedded personal and organizational structures will likely need suitable responses (Gilzene et al., 2021).

Gregory and Evans (2020) list several "mis-implementation" models that cause issues or lead to failed attempts at change. Mandated, top-down models demanding immediate change and results are typically ineffective. Narrow models that are singular in focus do little to change the culture and are easily dismissed. Models that are "color-blind" and fail to openly discuss or address issues regarding race and equity do not repair harm or adjust attitudes to be in line with restorative practices. The "train and hope" model is another "mis-implementation" model discussed by Gregory and Evans (2020): it is built on training an individual and expecting the desired behavior to grow throughout the organization naturally. Finally, the under-resourced, short-term model has proven ineffective time after time. The problems with this model are self-explanatory. Successful implementation will require strategic planning, resources, persistence, commitment, and time.

### **Conclusion**

Extensive research shows that punitive, zero-tolerance discipline policies, whose standard methods of addressing behavior are typically in the form of policies that take students away from class time (office referrals, suspensions, etc.), do little to address behavior change, increase the likelihood of poor educational outcomes, do not repair harm, and contribute to ongoing disparities in equity. In addition, these policies hurt the culture and climate of the school. In stark

contrast, recent research has found that discipline policies and cultural shifts grounded in restorative justice philosophies work to decrease adverse discipline outcomes, teach students accountability, encourage communication, seek to repair harm, allow students to recover from mistakes, and improve the culture of school communities. Cultural change is complex and requires shifts in thinking and significant commitments without promising immediate results. Zehr (2015, as cited by Abdou et al., 2023) described restorative justice as "a compass, not a map" (p.22). In the long run, persistence and fidelity to a school culture and a discipline philosophy built on restorative principles will lead to better outcomes and experiences for all. Although the Cedar Falls Community School District will undoubtedly face obstacles and encounter challenges along the way, a long-term commitment to restorative methods will be a catalyst for positive change and provide a more solid foundation for its mission, "Educating each student to be a lifelong learner and a caring, responsible citizen."

### References

- Abdou, A. S., Brady, J., Griffiths, A. J., Burrola, A., & vue, Julie. (2023). Restorative schools: A consultation case study for moving from theory to practice. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2023.2192205>
- Brown, M. A. (2021). We Cannot Return to "Normal": A Post-COVID Call for a Systems Approach to Implementing Restorative Justice in Education (RJE). *Laws*, 10(3), 68. <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws10030068>
- Bruhn, S. (2020). "The child is not broken": Leadership and restorative justice at an urban charter high school. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 122(8), 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200801>
- Dhaliwal, T. K., Daramola, E. J., Alonso, J. D., & Marsh, J. A. (2023). Educators' Beliefs and Perceptions of Implementing Restorative Practices. *Education and Urban Society*, 55(1), 88–118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245211048439>
- Garnett, B. R., Kervick, C. T., Moore, M., Ballysingh, T. A., & Smith, L. C. (2022). School Staff and Youth Perspectives of Tier 1 Restorative Practices Classroom Circles. *School Psychology Review*, 51(1), 112–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1795557>
- Gilzene, A. A. (2021). Disciplinary Dissent: The Troubled Implementation of a Restorative Justice Program at E.C. Johnson High School. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership*, 24(2), 46–63. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555458920966711>
- González, T., Sattler, H., & Buth, A. J. (2019). New directions in whole-school restorative justice implementation. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 36(3), 207–220. <https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.21236>

- Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerewitz, J. (2016). The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 325–353. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2014.929950>
- Gregory, A., & Evans, K. R. (2020, January 14). The starts and stumbles of restorative justice in education: Where do we go from here? *National Education Policy Center*. <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/restorative-justice>
- Hulvershorn, K., & Mulholland, S. (2018). Restorative practices and the integration of social-emotional learning as a path to positive school climates. *Journal of Research in Innovative Teaching & Learning*, 11(1), 110–123. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JRIT-08-2017-0015>
- Lodi, E., Perrella, L., Lepri, G. L., Scarpa, M. L., & Patrizi, P. (2021). Use of Restorative Justice and Restorative Practices at School: A Systematic Literature Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(1), 96. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19010096>
- Mansfield, K. C., Fowler, B., & 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>
- Mayworm, A. M., Sharkey, J. D., Hunnicutt, K. L., & Schiedel, K. C. (2016). Teacher Consultation to Enhance Implementation of School-Based Restorative Justice. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 385–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2016.1196364>

- Ortega, L., Lyubansky, M., Nettles, S., & Espelage, D. L. (2016). Outcomes of a restorative circles program in a high school setting. *Psychology of Violence, 6*(3), 459–468.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000048>
- Payne, A. A., & Welch, K. (2015). Restorative Justice in Schools: The Influence of Race on Restorative Discipline. *Youth & Society, 47*(4), 539–564.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12473125>
- Payne, A. A., & Welch, K. (2018). The Effect of School Conditions on the Use of Restorative Justice in Schools. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 16*(2), 224–240  
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/yvja16&i=220>
- Reimer, K. E. (2020). "Here, It's Like You Don't Have to Leave the Classroom to Solve a Problem": How Restorative Justice in Schools Contributes to Students' Individual and Collective Sense of Coherence. *Social Justice Research, 33*(4), 406–427.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-020-00358-5>
- Stewart, R., & Ezell, J. M. (2022). Understanding perceptions, barriers, and opportunities around restorative justice in urban high schools. *Urban Education, 004208592211191*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221119110>
- Sullivan, A. L., Van Norman, E. R., & Klingbeil, D. A. (2014). The exclusionary discipline of students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 35*(4), 199–210.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932513519825>
- Weaver, J. L., & Swank, J. M. (2020). A Case Study of the Implementation of Restorative Justice in a Middle School. *RMLE Online, 43*(4), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2020.1733912>