



## From Exclusionary to Restorative: An Intentional, Trauma-Sensitive Approach to Interrupting Racial Disparities, Reducing Violence, Strengthening Communities, and Accelerating Student Learning

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# Executive Summary

Many of Minnesota's public schools rely heavily on exclusionary disciplinary policies, and what we now know about the effects of such practices makes continued use of these policies irresponsible. Exclusionary discipline policies that rely foremost on suspensions and expulsions did not produce the benefits proponents hoped for, and, instead, they have done more damage than almost anyone could have envisioned. The good news is that there are far more appropriate, research-backed approaches to student behavior that Minnesota can adopt in place of exclusionary policies. In order to interrupt racial disparities, reduce violence, and accelerate student learning, the state must help schools make the massive shift away from exclusionary, punitive interventions and toward trauma-informed, restorative practices.

The legacy of zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies is troubling. These failed policies have caused great harm. Policymakers should give particular attention to these realities:

- Zero-tolerance and exclusionary practices have not led to safer schools or higher levels of academic achievement.
- Zero-tolerance and exclusionary practices have helped to create and sustain the school-to-prison pipeline.
- Zero-tolerance and exclusionary policies have led to grossly inequitable outcomes, with students of color and other minority groups becoming far more likely to face suspension and expulsion for behaviors that, when demonstrated by white students, are met with less severe responses.

But exclusionary policies cannot simply be abandoned without equipping educators with better approaches to student behavior. Students benefit when given "access to disciplinary approaches that can help address the underlying social and psychological causes of misbehavior," and at the same time, "schools must balance the need to ensure school safety, maintain classroom control for quality instruction, instill personal accountability, and provide strong responses in the face of grave misbehavior" (McMorris et al., 2013, p. 4). Minnesota schools can meet both of these needs by adopting a trauma-informed, restorative approach to students and student behavior.

## WHY DO WE NEED RESTORATIVE PRACTICES?

Restorative practices offer schools and districts the opportunity to reimagine their thinking around discipline and justice. In a restorative setting, far greater attention is paid to community building and engaging all students and staff in the school community. This is a paradigm shift from thinking about justice or discipline as a means of social control or a reaction to misbehavior to thinking about justice and discipline as mechanisms of building communities and teaching accountability (Morrison, 2016). Restorative practitioners seek to use non-exclusionary methods as much as possible for holding students accountable for their behavior.

In schools that have adopted restorative practices, time is spent early and often on a variety of practices that connect students and staff to one another in community, wherein all have shared obligations. Circles are often at the center of such efforts. Once students and staff establish their practice for circles and become comfortable using them, they can be and often are used as conflicts arise.

Schools that embrace restorative practices with fidelity adopt processes that help to build communities and prevent disruptive behavior in the first place as well as processes that help repair harm when it occurs. Restorative practice looks dramatically different than traditional approaches when student misbehavior occurs. At the center of the practice is the relationship between the wrongdoer and those impacted by the behavior. In this model, “those affected by an infraction or crime come together to identify how people were affected by the incident,” and this coming together serves as a catalyst for repair (Gregory et al., 2014, p. 2). Instead of putting the focus on the act itself, the restorative process puts focus primarily on the harm done.

Affected stakeholders may include student offenders, student and/or staff victims and their supporters, the offending students, parents or guardians, administrators, and can include bystanders and classmates, responding police officers or other security personnel, guidance counselors, school social workers, paraprofessionals, and teachers. An important aspect of this approach is that it “empowers victims, families, school staff, and offenders by putting them in active roles: all are given the opportunity to express needs and problem-solve, and offenders are given the responsibility of repairing the harm and thus earning redemption rather than passively receiving punishment” (McMorris et al., 2013, p. 7).

Schools scattered across the state are already finding success with restorative practices, mirroring trends nationwide. Schools that have adopted restorative practices have demonstrated remarkable results that include:

- A reduction in punitive disciplinary actions and problematic behavior over time.
- Greater respect for teachers and education support professionals across racial and ethnic groups.
- Fewer differences in the number of misconduct/defiance referrals issued to Asian/White and Latino/African American student groups.
- Increased student connectedness.
- Improved student academic achievement (credit accrual and progression toward graduation).
- Improved school climate.

(Armour, 2013; Baker, 2009; Fronius et al., 2016; Gonzalez, 2012; Gregory et al., 2015; McMorris et al., 2013; Mirsky, 2003; Suvall, 2009)

Minnesota has a wealth of resources already available to help schools and districts move in this direction. A full transition to a trauma-informed, restorative model takes several years, and there are a number of models schools and districts can follow as they set course. The Minnesota Department of Education houses a rich body of resources and tools and hosts discussions by restorative practitioners on a regular basis.

## WHY DO WE NEED TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS?

Kim Davidson, a second-grade teacher in northern Minnesota, recently had a conversation with her class about the things going on in their lives that make it hard to focus in school. She asked what makes it hard for them, and they responded. Five had parents in jail. One lost his eighth-grade sister suddenly to a heart condition earlier this year. Two have a parent who lives in another state. One said that she didn't know when her mom was getting out of jail or whether or not she would be able to see her. Several were in tears. Davidson asked, "what would you want to tell adults about what you go through?" One girl said, "that I worry." Davidson asked, "what if the adult tells you just not to worry?" The girl responded, "I would say it's a really big worry."

Due to some groundbreaking studies conducted in the last 20 years, we know far more now about what is happening in the brains of many of our students who are mostly likely to exhibit problematic behaviors in school. Educators and administrators need training, now widely available, on the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences among our student population, the effects of that toxic stress on the brain, and what that toxic stress looks like in terms of student behavior. The Minnesota Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, though conducted on the adult population, provides us with a clear picture of how many of our students have experienced adverse childhood experiences and which groups of our students are most likely to have high numbers of adverse childhood experiences.

Students experiencing high levels of toxic stress have different responses to a wide variety of interactions than students who have not experienced adverse childhood experiences. The very brain structure in kids with high levels of toxic stress is altered. The Minnesota Department of Health (2013) has argued that "toxic stress strengthens connections in the parts of the brain that are associated with fear, arousal, and emotional regulation. Additionally, toxic stress negatively impacts parts of the brain associated with learning and memory" (p. 9).

When a student with high levels of toxic stress has his or her fears triggered, he or she may display behaviors that seem to an outsider to be far more dramatic than what the situation calls for. The student's brain is wired to respond to potential threats as if they are as severe as the original adverse experiences have been. Once the brain releases cortisol, a person is in what is commonly known as "fight, flight, or freeze" mode. And when this is happening, the brain cannot physiologically take in new knowledge or problem solve" (Medina, 2014). The students "with unprocessed traumatic memories cannot deal with threats, real or perceived, which cause them to automatically drop out of their neo-cortex into their limbic area for the survival reactions of fight/flight" (Oehlberg, 2012, p. 5).

For many adults, educators among them, who are not well versed in the way trauma affects brain development and behavior, the reactions of students living with high levels of toxic stress can seem baffling. The behaviors seem irrational, and that's precisely because they are irrational. They come from parts of the brain that are triggered without the student's conscious choice. Such survival behaviors are automatic (Oehlberg, 2012). Once we understand what is happening in the brain when the fight, flight, or freeze response is triggered, we must move away from our traditional assumptions that the child is making a deliberate choice and can learn despite what is happening in the brain.

Although schools cannot directly change the economic and social conditions that lead to high levels of toxic stress in children, "the manner in which educators respond to the needs of these students is within their grasp when there is adequate preparation and training" (Oehlberg, 2012, p. 8). Schools have an opportunity to provide a range of supports to students with high levels of toxic stress. Resources designed to help districts and schools develop trauma-informed practices are plentiful. Trauma-informed schools are staffed by educators and administrators who are trained in ACEs, who understand the fight, flight, or freeze response, and who understand and develop programming to help students living with chronic levels of stress begin to develop resiliency. This skill will allow them, over time, to know the difference between the real threats to their safety that have manifested themselves in the students' traumatic experiences and the triggers in everyday life that feel like those real threats but are not. Trauma-informed "approaches are woven into the school's daily activities: the classroom, the cafeteria, the halls, buses, the playground" (Stevens, 2012, p. 3). This is the approach we need in Minnesota.

We know that trauma-informed practices can help address the root causes of disruptive behaviors, and Minnesota's schools should be empowered to address those student needs.

In the past six years, hundreds of schools across the nation have made the shift to be trauma-informed. The results are remarkable. They include:

- Dramatic reductions in suspensions and expulsions.
- Reductions in disruptive behavior, outbursts, and violent behavior.
- Reductions in office referrals.
- Significantly improved academic performance (grades, test scores, and graduation rates).
- Decreased absenteeism.
- Improved school climate.
- Reduced need for special education referrals and services.
- Reduced risk for compassion fatigue among educators.
- Increased levels of teacher satisfaction.
- Increased teacher retention rates.

(Children's Defense, 2015; Children's Law Center, 2015; Oehlberg, 2012; Stevens, 2015)

Minnesota needs to train all educators in the science about childhood trauma, so they can build inclusive schools that serve all students.

## HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER TO HELP MINNESOTA'S EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS?

Moving away from our over-reliance on exclusionary practices and adopting a trauma-informed, restorative practice in no way means that we do not hold students accountable for their behavior. On the contrary, by paying overt attention to the root causes of the behavior and the harm done community wide, whether another person was hurt or 16 other people were hurt, a trauma-informed, restorative approach includes identifying ways for the student to repair that harm and be returned to the community.

When we look at costs, we must foremost acknowledge that we have spent billions of dollars nationally on the mechanisms of zero-tolerance and exclusion. Enforcing and administering exclusionary policies costs taxpayers in Minnesota too much. We spend millions of dollars on law enforcement personnel in our schools and on locks, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras. The Dignity in Schools Campaign, the Justice Policy Institute (2014), and the National Center for Education Statistics (2011-12) estimate that "states spend up to \$148,767 to incarcerate a youth, and only \$10,667 to educate a student." This means money that could potentially help address the root causes of student behavior is instead being funneled to systems that simply remove them from schools. Cities also spend an enormous amount on the costs associated with "questioning, processing, charging and detaining the thousands of students who are arrested in school every year" (High Hopes, 2012, p. 5). We are spending our money on the wrong things. The Voices of Youth (2011) campaign has argued that

smarter investments can reverse this lose-lose situation, in which students lose valuable learning time and schools lose funding that could have otherwise been used to genuinely support student safety and achievement. The research has shown that the most [efficient] discipline policies focus on preventing student misconduct before it can escalate and using effective interventions when it does occur. By investing in policies that truly support academic achievement and school safety, [schools] can not only raise the graduation rates of [their] students but save taxpayers huge amounts of money in the long-term. (p. 5)

The dollars we have spent building, growing, and maintaining our exclusionary discipline policies have not led to their intended effect. And we know now that other approaches to student behavior are far more successful. It is time to redirect our resources to the services our students need.

In Minnesota, we can choose to stop fueling the school-to-prison pipeline. In fact, we can dismantle it. Teaching all of our students in a radically inclusive manner means shifting away from failed ways of responding to student behavior. It means shifting our focus. It means learning from what social science can now tell us with certainty. It means admitting that some of the policies that were adopted with good intentions ended up causing more harm


than was ever imagined at their inception. It means empowering educators, education support professionals, teachers, and administrators to meet students where they are and enabling them to equip students with the tools they need to be successful, thriving members of communities. Our students deserve the very best education we can provide, and we know now that this includes trauma-sensitive, restorative practices.





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