

# The Power of the Circle

In April 2014, students at Warren G. Harding Middle School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had just finished a week of state testing, which they had found very stressful. Like all Harding's teachers, 7th grade language arts teacher Denise James had her students sit in a circle and discuss the purpose of the tests and how they felt about having to take them.

The third girl to speak began to cry, saying, "I know I'm better than what the state says I am. I'm not 'Basic'."

A boy added, "My whole life I've been told I'm 'Below Basic,' and that's the way I felt. But in here, I don't feel like that."

Harding is one of many schools employing restorative practices to build relationships and improve school culture. Circles, like the ones on testing conducted schoolwide at Harding, are one of many elements of restorative practices. From California to Maine, elementary, middle, and high schools in urban, suburban, and rural areas are using these practices, both to build relationships and to decrease incidents of misbehavior, bullying, and violence—and to prevent such problems from occurring in the first place. The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Graduate School is helping schools implement the practices.

"Restorative practice is not a discipline program, but rather a framework for how to approach all relationships in a school building: leadership to staff, staff to staff, staff to students, and student to student," says John Bailie, assistant professor and director of continuing education at the IIRP Graduate School. "The way we handle discipline flows naturally out of the way we approach relationships in general. That's why we train educators in a range of practices, most of which are proactive. Responsive disciplinary practices are simply the natural result of that relational framework."

Schools that come closest to achieving a restorative school culture approach that goal through both strong administrative leadership and the creative efforts of teachers and staff. Warren G. Harding Middle School is one such school. Harding has an enrollment of more than 900 students in grades 6–8. The student body is 55 percent black, 29 percent Hispanic, 11 percent white, 2 percent Asian, and 100 percent economically disadvantaged (School District of Philadelphia, 2014).

## **"We are a community."**

In fall 2012, Harding began implementing the IIRP [SaferSanerSchools Whole-School Change Program](#), a comprehensive two-year initiative that trains the entire school staff in restorative practices. Principal Michael Calderone works hand in hand with assistant principal Betsaida Ortiz, whom he calls "the heart and soul of restorative practices at Harding." Ortiz says, "Teachers are learning that this is our way of living. We are a community."

To build community and relationships, Calderone and Ortiz have incorporated weekly proactive circles into the classroom routine. During this time, participants sit in a circle, with no physical barriers. Circles are often a sequential go-around in which each participant shares a thought, feeling, or experience related to the topic under discussion, sometimes passing a "talking piece" to indicate whose turn it is to speak. Circles provide opportunities for students to build trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). Teachers may use topics drawn from problems or behaviors they're seeing in their own classrooms, or they may focus on issues the leadership team wants addressed schoolwide, such as social media bullying, name calling, fighting, harassment, or thoughtlessness.

During the first year the school used restorative practices, Denise James's honors class addressed the circle topic, "Why do you think kids behave the way they do in our school?" The circle started out in a light vein: "to be cool," "to be popular." But when a student said, "because kids don't have enough guidance at home," it was as if a tap opened—students began to share intimate details of their lives.

First, a girl spoke about the time she lived in a box on the street, her mother addicted to crack and her father in prison: "[My parents] tell me, 'Don't do what I did.'"

"Sometimes it's hard to let go of what was going on before we come to school," one boy shared. His stepdad was beating his mom, and he was afraid the man would also hit his 3-year-old sister. "Do you ever wish you could *unsee*?" he asked.

That circle brought her class together, says James. "From then on, we were a family." James has built enthusiastic learning communities in all her classes, even the one she calls "a handful."

## **"You're being mean, and it's not funny."**

If teachers are struggling with the circle process, Ortiz helps them out. Circles are sometimes used to solve problems or address wrongdoing (Costello et al., 2010), and one teacher wanted to hold a circle to address name calling. However, four boys who had been calling another boy derogatory names related to homosexuality insisted they were only joking and didn't need to circle. Ortiz came to the classroom, told the boys to watch from outside the circle, and started the go-around, saying, "I'm disappointed because a member of this class is being affected by mean comments, and some of you don't see anything wrong with that." The students went around the circle, telling the four boys, "You're being mean," "It's not funny," and "We're tired of you doing this." The boy being teased also shared how he felt.

The four boys tried to comment, but Ortiz said they weren't allowed to speak unless they joined the circle. All four did. By the end, they all apologized, saying they were trying to be funny, but could now see there was nothing funny about their behavior.

In the past, when severe misbehavior occurred, students were suspended—sent home. They were not held accountable, and the suspension taught them nothing. The U.S. departments of Education and Justice (2014) issued joint guidelines earlier this year recommending that schools revise their discipline policies to move away from zero tolerance policies, which exclude students by means of suspensions and expulsions, often for minor infractions. The guidelines instead recommend alternatives such as restorative practices, which foster positive school climates.

Now, at Harding, even severe misbehavior—bullying, fighting, cursing, trashing a classroom when a substitute teacher is in charge—is addressed restoratively. Students are not suspended unless they commit a "nonnegotiable" offense, such as bringing a weapon or drugs to school. Instead, they are assigned to the reflection room. In the reflection room, students spend one to several days thinking, writing, and talking about their behavior in a circle with other students and a staff supervisor. Students address such restorative questions as "What happened? What were you thinking about at the time? What have you thought about since? Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way have they been affected? What do you think you need to do to make things right?" (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2009, p. 16). The entire process is a learning experience.

"At first it's a struggle," says Ortiz. Students are defensive. They insist they're innocent or blame others. But they're told they have to talk about it and hear how their behavior affected others. Through this process, students realize what they did wrong and how they could have made a better choice. "It's rare that students who leave the reflection room don't accept responsibility for what they did," says Ortiz.

### **"The kids didn't know the word *prejudice*."**

Like many teachers at Harding, 6th grade reading teacher Jennifer Levy uses circles not only to build relationships and respond to problems, but also for teaching and learning.

Participating in restorative circles prepares students for circles on academic subjects. For example, for Black History Month in February, Levy held a circle on civil rights. Her class was reading a book about Martin Luther King Jr. that talked about the racism he encountered early in life. The book spawned "a very deep circle, both restorative and academic," Levy says. "The kids didn't know the word *prejudice*."

In the circle, Levy traced the history of race in America, from slavery to the civil rights movement. This led to a go-around about race relations, during which the students and Levy discussed how blacks and whites treat one another and "how it is for me as a white teacher with black students and vice versa." This was a wonderful bonding experience for Levy and her students.

Immediately after all circles, while the conversation is fresh in their minds, Levy's students write about the circle in their journals. After the civil rights circle, Levy asked her students to write about why it's important to treat people the way they themselves want to be treated.

Circles also help teachers see how they can improve their teaching. When a teacher was having trouble with some of the students Levy also teaches, Ortiz asked Levy to invite the teacher to a circle in her classroom. The students had a chance to tell him how they felt about his class: All he ever did was hand out worksheets, which they finished in 15 minutes, they told him. As a result, they were bored and acted up. The teacher learned how his students felt, and he saw how circles could help him and his class.

### **"It's always a conversation."**

In fall 2013, Harding's student and staff rosters doubled. After the School District of

Philadelphia shuttered 23 schools for financial reasons, Harding took in some of the closed schools' former students and staff. This included 20–25 new teachers, some of whom had never heard of restorative practices.

To bring the new teachers up to speed, Ortiz held weekly restorative practices meetings, each week discussing a new chapter of the *Restorative Practices Handbook* (Costello et al., 2009). New teachers also sat in on circles that veteran teachers were holding in their classrooms to see how it's done. Some new teachers embraced restorative practices immediately. "I'm learning how to do this, and I feel my students and I are going through the process together," said Jennifer Levy when she was first learning the process.

Although Philadelphia is moving toward making restorative practices a districtwide effort, it is a major shift and takes time, says Ortiz, adding, "I still have teachers—mainly new ones—who say, 'This kid did *this*, and you're not suspending him?' I say, 'If that's not the approach I'm taking with you when you do something wrong, why would I do that with a child, who needs a lot more support than you do?'"

Indeed, Ortiz employs restorative practices to address issues with staff. To help a teacher having trouble with classroom management, she held a problem-solving process called a "fishbowl circle" (Costello et al., 2010). Ortiz asked the teacher to think of three questions he wanted answered about restorative practices and classroom management. The teacher sat in a small inner circle with a few veteran teachers; others sat in a larger surrounding circle and could move into an empty seat in the inner circle to contribute their suggestions.

Ortiz also uses restorative practices when disciplinary problems arise with staff. This was difficult at first, she says, "because of the unions." She has resolved that difficulty by sending memos ahead of time that include the specific restorative questions to be addressed in their one-on-one meeting, so the staff member can come prepared. "It's always a conversation," says Ortiz. "In the meeting, they figure out how to move forward."

The way Ortiz handled an incident with a school police officer is illustrative. The officer received information about a motorist following a young girl to school and failed to report it. In the past, the officer's actions would have gotten her in trouble. Instead, Ortiz worked through the restorative questions with her, which helped the officer understand how the incident had affected Ortiz, as well as the entire school community. "She will never do

anything like that again," says Ortiz.

## **"Students have taken ownership."**

How has the climate at Harding changed with restorative practices? "Students have taken ownership for their classroom and for the school community," explains principal Michael Calderone. Adds language arts teacher Denise James, "It's quieter, much more respectful. I know this is not how the real world works. We're a punitive society, even though that doesn't work! But especially with this population of kids, who feel they don't have a voice out there, we get great outcomes. They think, 'Oh my God, an adult is paying attention to me!'"

## **References**

Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2009). *The restorative practices handbook for teachers, disciplinarians, and administrators*. Bethlehem, PA: International Institute for Restorative Practices.

Costello, B., Wachtel, J., & Wachtel, T. (2010). *Restorative circles in schools: Building community and enhancing learning*. Bethlehem, PA: International Institute for Restorative Practices.

School District of Philadelphia. (2014). *School profile: Harding, Warren G. Middle School*. Retrieved from [https://webapps.philasd.org/school\\_profile/view/7110](https://webapps.philasd.org/school_profile/view/7110)

U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice. (2014). *Dear colleague letter on the nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from [www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201401-title-vi.html)