

Proposal for Reducing Traditional Disciplinary Procedures and Implementing Restorative Justice Practices



DEANNA GALLEGOS

WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote this paper for Dr. Brenda Rinard's UWP 104D (Writing in Education) course. The assignment was to create a proposal for change in an area of education that interested us. My proposal focuses on how investing in restorative justice practices in schools can support students' overall well-being by rethinking how teachers, administrators, and entire school communities view discipline. I examine policies that the Sacramento City Unified School District currently has in place in order to demonstrate the district's overreliance on traditional disciplinary procedures like suspensions and expulsions, which take students out of the classroom and away from engaging with their school environment. I hope that my proposal provides insight into how our schools' policies surrounding discipline influence our students' overall well-being. It is through incorporating restorative justice practices into our school cultures that we will be able to work towards providing the quality, inspirational education that our students deserve.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Deanna wrote this proposal for change in my UWP 104D course, Writing in Elementary and Secondary Education. This assignment, created by my colleague Katie Arosteguy, asks students to write a proposal to a stakeholder in education, arguing for a change in a specific local school policy. Students locate a school policy, and, using credible education sources, argue for a change that may positively affect learning outcomes. Deanna chose to argue for a change in disciplinary practices at a local high school in order to address the deeply problematic disparity in disciplinary actions against

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students of color versus their white peers. Her proposal is a thoughtful, forceful example of how social justice practices might be implemented in our schools in order to achieve educational equity.

—Brenda Rinard, University Writing Program

Deanna Gallegos
4015 Stargell Street
Davis, CA 95618

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Superintendent Jorge A. Aguilar
Sacramento City Unified School District Office
5735 47th Avenue
Sacramento, CA 95824

Dear Superintendent Aguilar,

There is no doubt that you, as the Superintendent of schools for the city of Sacramento, are committed to promoting equitable school environments and supporting students' overall well-being. During your previous appointment with the Fresno Unified School District, you had splendid results in improving graduation rates and reducing dropout rates. Your combined twenty-plus years of work in education is admirable, to say the least. Though this is your first school year working for the Sacramento City Unified School District, the public is confident in your ability to improve Sacramento schools. Given your background of focusing on equity and access in schools, you surely understand the importance of creating a supportive school community and responding to the needs of students.

However, traditional disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, are heavily enforced in Sacramento schools, but yield little in positive results. In the SCUSD's "Annual Parent and Student Right Notification and Standards of Behavior for 2017-2018," there are policies surrounding in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, but little discussion of student support resources. It is a concern that the mentoring and counseling services listed in the handbook "may not be

available at all sites” (2017, p. 10). With this proposal, I hope to express the faults of solely using traditional disciplinary policies, as they disrupt students’ academic and social growth, as well as their overall emotional well-being. Rather, I propose implementing restorative justice practices to all schools within the SCUSD. Restorative justice practices would take the place of many suspensions that could be better worked out through effective communication by teachers and administrators who strive to understand their students.

The introduction of widespread restorative justice practices will benefit entire school communities as teachers and administrators will be able to guide students through thinking about their actions and disrupt the cycle of harm that persists in school environments. Restorative justice practices will encourage positive interactions between teachers and students, ensuring that students’ voices and perspectives are heard and validated. Furthermore, I know that schools in the SCUSD have the fortitude and motivation to implement restorative justice practices and create school communities that will prepare their students for their futures.

Respectfully,

Deanna Gallegos

**Proposal for Reducing Traditional Disciplinary
Procedures and Implementing Restorative Justice
Practices
2017-2018**

Prepared for Superintendent Jorge A. Aguilar
Sacramento City Unified School District
Sacramento, California

By
Deanna Gallegos
University of California, Davis

INFORMATIVE ABSTRACT

The Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) has high rates of suspensions and expulsions; furthermore, there is racial disparity in the meting out of discipline. In particular, black students are suspended at rates that are four to five times greater than their white classmates. Overall, taking students out of the classroom can lead students to fall behind their peers academically, to have fewer opportunities to learn important social-behavioral skills, and to suffer in terms of their emotional well-being. I propose that SCUSD schools reduce the amount of suspensions and expulsions they hand out in favor of implementing restorative justice practices. Entire school communities, including teachers and administrators, must be adequately trained on how to introduce restorative justice practices into their classrooms and school environment. It is important that teachers and administrators not shy away from discussing how racism and hierarchical power dynamics shape school climates and how discipline is applied. A major goal of restorative justice practices is to promote positive interactions between teachers and students and build community. Further discussion on the details surrounding the implementation of this paradigm shift are included in the methods, feasibility, and personnel sections of this proposal. Executing restorative justice practices take time and energy to do properly, but such an investment will be well worth it when students benefit from a more communal school culture.

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Disciplinary practices in U.S. schools has been a subject of discussion across many generations. For decades, our nation's public schools have turned to suspensions and expulsions to "correct" student misbehavior. In their article, "After Sticks, Stones, and Harmful Words," Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Dominique Smith (2016) state, "Since 1974, suspension and expulsion rates have doubled in the United States" (p. 54). Additionally, students of color, students with disabilities, those who are in foster care, and those who are in poverty or homeless are most at-risk of being suspended or expelled (Fisher et al., 2016). Traditional disciplinary practices do little to change student behavior, but rather, often have the adverse effect of continuing a cycle of harm and contributing to dropout rates and the fracturing of school communities.

One approach to disrupting the cycle of harm perpetuated by suspensions and expulsions is that of restorative justice practices. Restorative justice practices focus on restoring wellness within a school community by giving voice to those who are harmed, repairing relationships, and encouraging accountability through collaborative decision-making (Mullet, 2014). Restorative justice practices seek to promote better communication and interactions between students, teachers, and school administrators.

Background

The Sacramento City Unified School District's "Annual Parent and Student Rights Notification and Standards of Behavior for 2017-2018" handbook includes details of the district's disciplinary practices, including suspensions and expulsions. In their handbook, SCUSD states that in-school suspensions mean that "the student is removed from class but remains on campus *isolated from the other students*" (emphasis mine, 2017, p. 10). To put this policy into perspective, during the 2014-2015 school year, the Sacramento City Unified School District had 5,579 in-school and out-of-school suspensions (Education Data Partnership).

When isolating students through suspensions and expulsions, teachers and school administrators fail to recognize that "students who

present with social-emotional deficiencies need connectedness and belonging, not exclusion” (Riley, 2018, p. 16). One way to focus on students’ well-being is through restorative justice practices. Restorative justice practices “utilize a problem-solving approach to school discipline issues [through a] proactive approach that builds community around common infractions through discussions and exploration” (Riley, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, restorative justice practices can improve teacher-student interactions, and thus create a better classroom and schoolwide environment for everyone in the school community.

Statement of the Problem

There is an overreliance on traditional disciplinary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, in the Sacramento City Unified School District. When students are taken out of the classroom, they are not able to learn and thus (1) fall academically behind their peers and (2) miss out on the social-behavioral skills they should experience in the classroom. In addition, students of color are more likely than their white peers to be suspended or expelled. Overall, there is a problem surrounding the way teachers and administrators view discipline as correcting student behavior and ordering student compliance. Regulating student behavior through punitive punishments does not change students’ actions in the long run; if anything, repeated suspensions and/or expulsions push students further away from the academic setting while ignoring the root causes of the initial “misbehavior,” thereby perpetuating a cycle of harm.

Problem I: An Overuse of Suspensions and Expulsions Hurts Students’ Academics, Social-Behavioral Skills, and Emotional Well-Being

When students are suspended from school, they miss out on valuable instruction time in their classes. As a result, students miss lessons and fall behind their peers in their academic goals. Ultimately, when students are not present in the classroom, they are not able to learn (Fisher et al., 2016). Additionally, students are not given opportunities to develop their social-behavioral skills when they are removed from the classroom setting. When a teacher or administrator confronts a student and scolds them for “misbehavior,” the student may feel that they are being singled

out and interpret the interaction as a negative one. A pattern of multiple negative interactions with adult figures at school can cause a student to pull away from the school environment that fails to understand the student's perspective.

The overuse of suspensions and expulsions further harm students' emotional well-being. When students are suspended, they are no longer around their peers, friends, and teachers. This course of action dramatically decreases the number of people the suspended student has surrounding them to act as companions, supporters, and mentors. Ideally, students have people they can turn to outside of school, such as parents, guardians, extended family members, and other friends and peers within their neighborhood; however, this ideal cannot be applied to all students, as many surely have few other adult figures in their lives, aside from teachers, able to support and advise them. So then who can support students' emotional well-being? Schools can tackle this task through the resources they provide their students. In the Sacramento City School District, some student support resources are said to be offered, such as, "counseling . . . conflict resolution . . . [and] mentoring" (Sacramento City School District, 2017, p. 10-11). However, the accessibility and availability for these resources needs improvement, as the district's handbook includes a disclaimer that these types of counseling and mentoring resources "may not be available at all sites" (Sacramento City School District, 2017, p. 10). The lack of any mention of a number of minimum required student support resources per school campus is also an issue.

Problem II: A Disproportionate Number of Students of Color Are Being Suspended and Expelled

In the Sacramento City Unified School District, a disproportionate number of students of color are suspended and expelled compared to their white peers. Comparing specifically black students and white students in the district during the 2014-2015 school year reveals white students made up 18.1% of the student population, and black students made up 17.3% of the student population (Education Data Partnership). During the same school year, black students were given 599 in-school suspensions, and white students had a total of 143 in-school suspensions (Education Data Partnership). A similar pattern holds up for out-of-

school suspensions. Black students had a reported 2,156 out-of-school suspensions, and white students had 455 out-of-school suspensions (Education Data Partnership). By looking at the numbers, it is clear that there is a discrepancy in which students are disciplined. Although there are roughly the same number of white and black students within the SCUSD, black students are suspended at rates of four to five times higher than white students.

The overrepresentation of students of color being disciplined speaks to a greater issue of racism in schools. Whether schools are using traditional discipline models (like suspensions and expulsions) or restorative justice practices, it is important to have conversations surrounding how racism affects students and the school community as a whole. If such racism goes unchecked, schools “will maintain racial disproportionality in discipline, regardless of what particular discipline practices are used” (Lustick, 2017, p. 685). It is not simply enough to cut out suspensions and expulsions; doing so will only be reflected in statistics on paper wherein the number of suspensions drop. Rather, it is crucial that discussions about school discipline policies should include significantly more attention to racial inequity.

Problem III: The Hierarchical Power Structures in Teacher-Student Relationships

The disciplinary practice of suspending and expelling students creates an uneven power dynamic between teachers and students. The problem stems from generations of schooling reinforcing the notion that teachers must command their classrooms in an authoritarian manner in order to gain students’ respect and compliance. In fact, it can be said that the “social reproduction and education for control and compliance are deeply embedded in schooling and highly resistant to change” (Vaandering, 2014, p. 65). This problem makes it even more difficult for teachers to form positive relationships with students and promote effective communication within the classroom.

However, it must be noted that restorative justice practices also bear the risk of reproducing hierarchical power structures. If restorative justice practices are enacted with a focus on classroom and behavior management, teachers may “inadvertently reinforce an agenda of compliance and control rather than [restorative justice’s] intended purpose of building relational,

interconnected and interdependent school cultures” (Vaandering, 2014, p. 65). Thus, the issue of unequal power dynamics must be addressed, regardless of what disciplinary practices a school uses.

PROPOSED PLAN

First, I propose to change the Sacramento City School District’s approach and view of discipline at its numerous schools by decreasing the number of suspensions and expulsions by only exercising these practices for the most extreme cases where student and teacher safety is an issue. Second, I propose a two-part plan to implement restorative justice practices at all schools in the SCUSD. Part A acts to input new district wide policies surrounding implementing restorative justice practices at all schools in the SCUSD. Part B acts to properly train teachers on restorative justice practices; multiple trainings, workshops, continued education, and culturally responsive pedagogy education would be utilized to best support teachers, and subsequently, all students.

Methods

I. Dramatically Reduce the Reliance on Suspensions and Expulsions as the Primary Form of Discipline

I propose a change in the Sacramento City Unified School District’s “Standards of Behavior” handbook regarding the manner in which suspensions and expulsions are considered. A section in the handbook outlines whether suspension and/or expulsion may be considered for particular circumstances; circumstances include “acts of violence,” “theft or stealing,” “attendance truant,” “sexual assault or sexual battery,” “willful defiance or disruption of school activities” and “bullying,” to name a few (Sacramento City Unified School District, 2017, p. 12-14). I propose an addition to this handbook stating that suspensions and expulsions be considered for circumstances that cause alarm regarding the immediate danger to student and teacher safety. Suspensions and expulsions could be a last resort for when principals are faced with situations that involve violence and weapons on school campus, for instance. If there is an emergency, such as if a student has a weapon on campus, it would be within reason for the acting principal and their colleagues to require that

student not be allowed back on campus, around the rest of the student population, in order to ensure campus safety. This policy, then, would advise administrators to mete out suspensions and expulsions only in the most extreme cases in which the safety of students and teachers are at risk.

II. Implement Restorative Justice Practices

A) Introduce a New District-Wide Policy Committed to Focusing on Restorative Justice Practices

The current SCUSD handbook lacks any mention of restorative justice practices. I propose that a section be added to the District handbook stating the District's commitment to incorporating restorative justice practices at all school sites.

The new section would include information about restorative justice, explaining it as a mindset and approach that focuses on repairing harm done to relationships through identifying the causes of the ongoing cycle of harm (Mullet, 2014). The handbook would also identify examples of restorative justice practices, including "restorative circles," developing re-entry plans, and encouraging teachers to build positive relationships with students. Creating a re-entry plan with a student might entail having a teacher rehearse an apology with a student, helping a student identify a lifeline (a person who the student could go to for advice), and scheduling follow-ups with students to make sure they are adjusting successfully to entering the school space after they caused harm (Fisher et al., 2016). Providing students with the opportunity to reflect on their actions and craft an apology demonstrates restorative justice's goal of promoting accountability for students' actions, while supporting positive interactions between teachers and students (Tyler and Perez, 2015).

Through restorative justice practices, students will not be sent out of the classroom nearly as often as before. As a result, students remain in the classroom and are thus able to keep up with the school curriculum while practicing social skills and maintaining their own emotional well-being.

B) *Provide Teachers with Continual Training on Restorative Justice Practices*

In order for restorative justice practices to work, it is of the utmost importance that teachers are adequately trained. Recalling from her own experience of working with preservice teachers, Maisha T. Winn found that “most of the emerging teachers experienced academic success in classrooms and schools with little or no understanding of what it is like for students who struggle socially and/or academically” (Winn, 2018, p. 253). Winn’s story demonstrates the disconnect that teachers may have from their own students’ experiences. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the entire school community to ensure that teachers are trained on how to employ restorative justice practices in their own classrooms.

However, it is not enough to only provide *one* restorative justice workshop with teachers and expect incredible, instantaneous results. Implementing restorative justice practices across an entire school (and an entire school district at that) will require strong, continual training and support throughout the school-year; a one-off meeting or workshop simply will not cut it (Winn, 2018). Furthermore, it is significant to note that “[r]estorative discipline is not a scripted program to be applied similarly across groups” (Mullet, 2014, p.159). Each particular school will need to adapt to their own students’ needs.

To put it simply, teachers need to understand their students. Through restorative justice practices, students and teachers can use narratives to humanize both themselves and others (Winn, 2018). Teachers can build positive relationships with students by knowing all students’ names, eliminating sarcasm, showing respect for students’ perspectives, and knowing at least one thing about a student’s story (Fisher et al., 2016). To help aid in the process, teachers should also be trained on culturally responsive pedagogy (Lustick, 2017). By learning about how to employ culturally relevant tactics in the classrooms, teachers will be better prepared to engage with students of various backgrounds. Having teachers be trained in culturally responsive pedagogy would further help to bring about discussions surrounding racism and authoritarian structures embedded within school cultures.

Feasibility

Implementing restorative justice practices would not put a strain on Sacramento City Unified School District's budget. Teachers and administrators are already involved in trainings and meetings that discuss the procedures surround suspending or expelling a student; some time that would normally be allotted to the topic of traditional disciplinary procedures could go towards training teachers and administrators in restorative justice practices. Furthermore, the time that would normally be spent with students in the principal's office being scolded and informed that they are suspended could instead be time spent utilizing restorative justice practices, such as a restorative circle.

More than anything, implementing restorative justice practices across the Sacramento City Unified School District will entail time, effort, and energy. But many education scholars and researchers argue that restorative practices "are worth the investment of time and energy" as they have the power "to disrupt inequitable applications of school discipline" (Fisher et al., 2016, p. 58).

Personnel

Teachers and principals would be largely responsible for keeping up to date on how to best practice restorative justice in their schools. However, teaching in and of itself is a career that involves continuous growth as teachers better learn their craft (Winn, 2018). In order for restorative justice practices to reach their full potential at a school site, it is essential that *all* teachers and administrators reevaluate their views surrounding discipline and punishment. It simply will not do to introduce restorative justice practices but continue to view discipline through a hierarchical lens. Restorative justice practices require active listening on behalf of everyone (but especially adults working in a school) so that students who caused harm or were harmed are able to have a voice and share their perspective and feelings. Teachers and administrators must be willing to take on the task of utilizing restorative justice practices to positively influence the emotional well-being of all students.

CONCLUSION

This proposal hopes to inspire Superintendent Aguilar to consider the needs of students in the Sacramento City Unified School District. In a time when our country is so sharply divided on numerous matters, one common ground we all have is that our children's education and well-being is a priority. Taking students out of school through suspensions and expulsions does little to change long-term behavior; rather, it causes increased harm to students' academic progress, social skills, and emotional well-being. Restorative justice practices are rooted in humanizing people and creating a positive community atmosphere. When school communities engage with restorative justice practices and review how they perceive discipline, teachers and administrators are then able to "see the full humanity of all children" (Winn, 2018, p. 260). If we genuinely want to reach every student, we must be willing to put in the time and energy to disrupt the cycle of harm where "over time, hurt people tend to hurt other people" (Mullet, 2014, p. 158). Speaking with students, understanding their stories, and validating their perspectives will make for more motivated learners and more talented teachers.

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