

Equitable School Discipline

This is one of a series of evidence-based strategies to help states and school districts invest Covid relief aid effectively. Read all 18 strategies in FutureEd's [Covid Relief Playbook](#).

Given the trauma and isolation students and staff have suffered during the pandemic, schools should develop a measured response to discipline. Studies show suspensions are correlated with lower student achievement, and that Black and Latino students, whose communities were hardest hit by the pandemic, have higher suspension rates than their White peers. Covid relief money can be used to implement equitable school discipline practices and a nonpunitive approach to conflict. This approach, which research shows lowers suspension rates and improves school climate, can include restorative practices, in which students come together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air grievances.

THE RESEARCH

Restorative practices, which originated in the criminal justice system, have gained a foothold in schools in the past decade as districts look for ways to reduce disparities in discipline practices. Restorative practices can include affective statements, which tell a person how their behavior makes the individual feel; restorative questions, which ask the student what they were thinking during a situation and how they could have handled it differently; and restorative meetings with families, which give the family an opportunity to hear the student's decision-making process and make their own affirmative statements. Restorative practices can also include use of physical spaces such as a "peace room," which is a dedicated safe space for students to work through difficult emotions and situations.

In 2018, the RAND Corporation **evaluated** the impact of restorative practices in Pittsburgh Public Schools by randomly assigning schools to implement a program from the International Institute for Restorative Practices. The program included training all staff on affective statements, restorative questions, restorative approaches with families, and more. After two years, staff reported stronger relationships with students and additional staff reported having the ability to manage student conduct. Ratings of teacher and school leadership also increased. Female students had a 27 percent reduction in days of instruction lost to suspension after two years of the program. And Black students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students each had a 16 percent reduction.

Researchers at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago in 2017 **studied** the impact of the "peace room" component of restorative discipline. After combining data on the use of peace rooms with data on discipline from Chicago Public Schools, the researchers found that students who used the peace room received 30 percentage points fewer out-of-school suspensions and 14 percentage points fewer in-school suspensions compared to those who did not use the room.

A 2013 **study** by researchers at Rutgers University used surveys of 412 students in 29 high school classrooms to understand the impact of restorative practices on teacher-student relationships and school discipline. They found teachers with high levels of implementation of restorative practices had more positive relationships with diverse students and issued fewer referrals for

Equitable School Discipline

Continued

suspensions or expulsions, including for Latino and Black students, compared with teachers with low levels of implementation.

However, University of California, Irvine, researchers found in a 2019 working [paper](#) that White students benefited more than their peers from the lower discipline rates in the restorative

system, a finding which could exacerbate discipline disparities. In a second [study](#), RAND researchers note restorative practices may only be effective in elementary schools and may not improve academic achievement at any level. The RAND findings are complicated by the fact that some control schools in the study implemented restorative practices, which likely diminished the comparative impact of the practices.

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Restorative practices are most effective when schools make a wholesale shift to that disciplinary framework, with strong buy-in from faculty and staff. The RAND Corporation recommends implementing practices that can be woven into the school day. The researchers also suggest providing teachers with mandatory professional development, books and other materials on restorative discipline, as well as coaching and feedback from school leaders.

RESEARCH

- [Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?: MODERATE](#)
- [Restorative Justice Reduces Use of In-School Suspensions: MODERATE](#)
- [The Promise of Restorative Practices to Transform Teacher-Student Relationships and Achieve Equity in School Discipline: PROMISING](#)
- [Restorative for All? Racial Disproportionality and School Discipline Under Restorative Justice: MODERATE](#)
- [Evaluation of a Whole-School Change Intervention: Findings from a Two-Year Cluster-Randomized Trial of the Restorative Practices Intervention: MODERATE](#)

RESOURCES

- [TOOL: Create a High School Peace Room](#)
- [Restorative Justice Program Guidelines](#)
- [The Promise of 'Restorative Justice' Starts to Falter Under Rigorous Research](#)
- [Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review](#)