



EQUALITY OR EQUITY?

What's Your Lens for Restorative Justice?



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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety, Engaging the Community, Closing the Gap

The idea behind restorative justice is to create new lenses of viewing crime and justice. The old lens of justice takes a punitive

discipline approach; restorative justice focuses on creating a positive outcome. Diving into restorative justice caused me to focus on two concepts: equality and equity.

Equality is based on one-size fits all where everyone gets the same thing. It calls for a well-used student handbook applied the same way for all students, regardless of the situation or circumstance. **Equity** is based on the

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recognition that one size doesn't fit all, and instead of making things equal, it tries to make things fair. Equity requires us to listen to students more closely and build meaningful relationships, taking all factors into consideration when handling discipline, and acknowledging not all situations are the same for all students.

I found many staff who agreed with an equity-based philosophy and were passionate about the fact that we were not enforcing all rules on all students. However, not all staff in my school or yours are all-in on equity just yet. Equality has been in our cultural lexicon for a long time, and it's not easy to let go of.

PUSHING THE COMFORT ZONE

In recent years, the Legislature and OSPI pushed a lot of us out of our comfort zone by focusing on eliminating and/or reducing suspensions. This is a hot and current issue all administrators are dealing with. It's also caused me to change some of my thinking to be as equitable as possible.

Sometimes I struggle when I'm taken outside my comfort zone and my moral imperative box — and this is tough. While I recognize "moral imperative" does not always mean "best practice," it still is a driving force for me. I think what's important is we make decisions to restore the student rather than punish the student. This means being committed to building good working relationships with students who are likely not very good at building relationships.

It feels like we are seeing more students who feel entitled and that school rules are "dumb," and these kids often struggle academically. As I began to introduce the concept of boundaries to them, I immediately received pushback. I quickly learned one of the best strategies was to help students practice a few simple

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boundaries to help them get used to the idea that everything we want is not always what is best for us, and that some of our wants can actually be very harmful. Part of my restorative justice philosophy is to introduce boundaries. Start small and keep it simple because you're likely to receive pushback. Eventually, you want them to realize that what we want is not always best for us, and some of our wants can actually be very harmful to ourselves and others.

BRIDGING GAPS

To get kids to value school the way we think they should, we came up with a few ideas. We established a community truancy board, created attendance competitions, developed attendance-earned rewards, and found other opportunities to increase attendance. About 70 percent of my first semester's discipline issues have been truancy related. We are fighting cultural traditions that take students off campus for weeks when there is a death in the family, and a system that supports parents calling in to excuse any student absence they choose.

Restorative justice establishes relationships and mentorships to create the belief that attendance matters in school. It is a system that says every period counts. This brings me to my next point: parents partnering with the school is vital to the success of students — a concept people need to be retrained on.

Restorative justice raises accountability with added support structures in place to help students succeed. One of the best support structures is a mentorship program. If your high school cannot afford additional staff, try using juniors and seniors who can lead, mentor, and coach. Restorative justice is made up of a larger team of support that goes

beyond meeting with a student once or twice or making a few phone calls. After the right supports are in place, then we can talk about suspending the suspensions.

THE WHOLE CHILD INITIATIVE

Under the Whole Child Initiative, we will take an instructional approach to behaviors instead of focusing on the negative behaviors and consequences.

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This means allowing time in class to teach targeted behaviors. We want to show non-examples, along with targeted examples, when we teach. If a student does not write the correct math answer on the board, we do not send them to the office. Rather, we teach them how to come up with the right answer. It is the same with targeted behaviors.

As a school, we offer a wrap-around approach to helping students by developing support systems through the community you might not typically expect at a school. For example, could you partner with a local medical facility to help meet student needs on campus? In my school, we offer counseling with our local Native American elders — "The Peacemakers" — to anyone who wants to meet with them. We also brought in functional family therapists to meet with kids, as well

as Care Net, a non-profit organization that reaches out to single mothers and pregnant girls. All these examples came from our Community Truancy Board we initiated two years ago.

DEFINING JUSTICE

It is important the word “justice” is well-defined so we know what we are after. Justice for one subgroup may not mean the same thing for another. And justice should not be culturally bound. It is not limited to one’s perception or comfort level. As an institution whose goal is building lifelong learners, we are in the business of preparing our students for a future in society. We must meet



the norms and values expected by our society, regardless of our personal norms and values.

The bottom line: In restorative justice, we look for the most equitable answer to help restore each student back to wholeness. My philosophy throughout my whole career has been we get better results when we build positive relationships with students before we expect them to change their behaviors. ■

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