

# A rock and rug—A new technology to bring Restorative Practices in Schools

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Restorative Strategies

“If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children”.—Mahatma Gandhi

In the summer of 2009, I was hired as the Chief Dean at Christian Fenger High School which had been designated by Chicago Public Schools as a Turnaround School. For years the school's steadily declining test scores and high incidences of violence moved the Board of Education to turn the school around. What resulted from this decision was that former staff member were removed and new staff were hired including the principal. Youth from another community were bused in to this newly turned around school and the school year started in the fall of 2009 with optimism for the new direction the school and the community were moving toward. And then September 24, 2009, changed everything. On that day a student was beaten to death in a mob fight that started at the school and spilled out into the community. The fight was recorded by a student and posted on Youtube. The video went viral and it ended up on every major news outlet broadcasting all over the world. Three weeks into the start of the Turnaround, our school had turned into the most violent school in the U.S. and our students and the community were paraded around in the press as unruly and violent.

In this new role, I was hired to make the school building a safe and warm environment for our staff and students. Unfortunately, the policy I was asked to use was the policy of zero tolerance. This policy dictated that we use suspension, expulsion, and arrest to deal with the behaviors that we were forced to address. Over 375+ students were arrested that first school year and many more were suspended and expelled. There was no re-entry process in place so students came to back further behind and further disconnected to the school. But what I knew in my heart was that zero tolerance would never get our school to be that safe and warm environment I envisioned when I was hired. When students returned back to

school after their suspension, expulsion or arrest, the students were more disconnected from school and were angrier at the school staff for the punishment they received. There was no accountability so there was a lot of blaming and shaming in our school. They were also so far behind academically that there was no way they would pass their classes leaving them further behind. Our school became a push-out factory churning out violent ill prepared young adults destined to end up in jail or killed.

I became aware of the fact that this problem of relying on zero tolerance was across the nation. The Zero Tolerance policy were not only affecting our schools but schools throughout the nation were using these measures which impacted communities of color disproportionately throughout the state and the nation. In 2012, The Chicago Tribune article entitled, "Illinois, Chicago Public Schools top national list for suspension disparity", Joel Hood stated that "One of every four African-American public school students in Illinois were suspended at least once for disciplinary reasons during the 2009-10 school year which was the highest rate among 47 states examined in a national study . . ." The situation is even more drier when you look at national trends around the use of zero tolerance. Mr. Hood further writes that "nationally the report found 1 out of every 6 black students were suspended at least once in 2009-10, compared with 1 out of 14 Latinos and 1 and 20 whites."

Zero Tolerance practices were having a negative effect on our school's culture and climate and there needed to be a change in direction. The policies were not only racist but wrong for our schools and for our country. Our school teams began to have conversations about the direction we would like to see the school go. Parents and staff started meeting to discuss what would be the best approach for our school. Did we have it within ourselves to change our approach? What was out there that could be the game changer for our youth and staff? The answers to these questions came in the form of a conversation with my principal. We shared our concern for the direction that our school was moving toward and felt that another approach needed to be tried. That approach would be restorative justice practices in our school. Out of these conversations birthed the ideas that would re-brand our school community into a school of peace. Out of these conversation, we crafted a new direction that would the potential to teach our students how to resolve conflict. And out of these conversation, my role would be changed and the lives of our students and staff will changed for the better.

What is Restorative Justice and its practices? Restorative Justice is a process where all stakeholders affected by an injustice have an opportunity to

discuss how they have been affected by the injustice and to decide what should be done to repair the harm. With crime, restorative justice is about the ideas that if crime hurts, justice should heal. It follows that conversation with those who have been hurt and those who have afflicted the harm must be central to the process—J Braithwaite (2004).

The diagram below highlights some differences between traditional discipline I was asked to do and Restorative Justice philosophy in schools.

<b>Traditional Discipline</b>	<b>Restorative Justice</b>
<b>Goal:</b> To punish the youth	<b>Goal:</b> To <b>restore</b> (or transform) the community and individuals involved to the functioning equilibrium that was offset by the offense
Focus on Retribution	Focus on rehabilitation, and repairing the harm that was caused to all parties involved
Involves the “Rule Keepers” and the youth offender	Involves the community, the “youth offender” and the “youth victim”
Holds the youth offender accountable to the rules	Holds the youth offender accountable for the harm that was caused to the victim and the community as a whole

What resulted from this was a revisioning of my position in our school. My new title was the Culture and Climate Coordinator. The reasoning behind changing my title specifically revolved around how my new role was perceived by both staff and students. When I spoke to one of my students, he asked, “Are you still a DEAN!” I told the students “Yes”! “I am the Dean of Peace”. The student did not realize it but he was defining my new role by the question he asked. He was helping me to re-

define my role and to give students an opportunity to define how we are to interact in the school setting. He was helping me to distance myself from my former role as the Chief Dean and to build a new relationship that revolved around Restorative Practice. I had to re-build trust with students and staff as I forged a new relationship based on peace and social emotional learning. The responsibility to suspend, expel, and arrests was taken out of my hands and what was left in my hands was a rock and a rug. What I mean by this is that I was left with the only tools and process that I knew could be used to support the social/emotional process in the school setting—Restorative Practices and specifically the Peace Circle. In this new role I was responsible for ensuring that our school had a culture and climate that was warm and inviting. I used Restorative Practices as my basis for moving our school toward becoming a peace school and to build capacity in our school around these practices. I did this by training key staff members in our school community as well as youth who lead the peace initiatives. The parents began to engage in this work and assisted us in moving our school community forward as well. We instituted a “Peace Room” which was used as place where restorative practices came alive. Students and staff were able to use these practices to build trust, to deal with conflict and to move toward respect and healing. Here are some of the practices I implemented as a part of this work.

## **Restorative Group Conferencing<sup>1</sup>**

**(Also called Family Group Conferencing or Accountability Conferencing)**

Restorative group conferencing is a meeting to decide how to resolve an incident. It involves the community of people most affected by an offense. Participants usually include the victim and the offender as well as the family, friends and key supporters of both. Participation by all involved is voluntary.

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<sup>1</sup> . This section has been adopted from Appendix G of the 2009-2010 Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual; STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT FOR THE CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR THE 2009-2010 SCHOOL YEAR, Section: 705.5, P 31-32.

In a restorative conference the affected parties are brought together by a trained facilitator to discuss how they and others have been harmed by the offense and how that harm might be repaired. To participate, the offender must admit to the offense. The facilitator contacts the victim and offender to explain the process and invites them to the conference; the facilitator also asks them to identify key members of their support systems, who will be invited to participate as well.

The conference typically begins with the offender describing the incident, followed by each participant describing the impact of the incident on his or her life. It is preferable to allow the victim to start the discussion, if they wish. Through these narrations, the offender is faced with the human impact of the behavior on the victim, on those close to the victim, and on the offender's own family and friends. The victim has the opportunity to express feelings and ask questions about the incident. After a thorough discussion of the impact of the behavior on those present, the victim is asked to identify desired outcomes from the conference, and thus help to shape the obligations that will be placed on the offender. All participants may contribute to the problem-solving process of determining how the offender might best repair the harm he or she has caused. The session ends with participants signing an agreement outlining their expectations and commitments.

## **Victim Offender Mediation<sup>2</sup>**

**(Also called Victim-Offender Conferencing, or Victim-Offender Dialogue)**

Victim offender mediation is a process that provides interested victims an opportunity to meet their offender, in a safe and structured setting, and engage in a mediated discussion of the offense. With the assistance of a trained mediator, the victim is able to tell the offender about the offense's physical, emotional, and financial impact; to receive answers to lingering questions about the offense and the offender; and to be directly involved in developing a restitution plan for the offender to pay back his or her financial debt. This process is different from mediation as it is practiced in civil or commercial disputes, since the involved parties are not "disputants" nor of similar status - with one an admitted offender and the other the victim. Also, the process is not primarily focused upon reaching a settlement, although most sessions do, in fact, result in a signed restitution agreement. Because of these fundamental differences with standard mediation practices, some

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<sup>2</sup> <sup>2</sup>Parts of this section have been adopted from Appendix G of the 2009-2010 Chicago Public Schools Policy Manual; STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT FOR THE CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS FOR THE 2009-2010 SCHOOL YEAR, Section: 705.5, P 33.

programs call the process a victim offender "dialogue," "meeting," or "conference."

## **Goals**

The goals of victim offender mediation include:

- Support the healing process of victims by providing a safe and controlled setting for them to meet and speak with the offender on a strictly voluntary basis
- Allow the offender to learn about the impact of the offense on the victim and to take direct responsibility for his/her behavior
- Provide an opportunity for the victim and offender to develop a mutually acceptable plan that addresses the harm caused by the offense

## **Implementation**

### *Overview*

In implementing any victim offender mediation program, it is critically important to maintain sensitivity to the needs of the victim. First and foremost, the mediator must do everything possible to ensure that the victim will not be harmed in any way. Additionally, the victim's participation must be completely voluntary, as should the participation of the offender. The victim should also be given choices, whenever possible, concerning decisions such as when and where the mediation session will take place, who will be present, who will speak first, etc. Cases should be carefully screened regarding the readiness of both victim and offender to participate. The mediator should conduct in person, pre mediation sessions with both parties and make follow-up contacts, including the monitoring of any agreement reached.

# Peer Jury

## Overview

Peer Jury is a student group that hears cases of student misconduct and decides disciplinary outcomes. Peer Jury is used as an alternative to suspension with the goal of decreasing the number of suspension days. It is similar to the idea of a youth court, however, Peer Juries use restorative justice principles in the hearings and in the disciplinary actions. Specifically, in peer jury offenders (called referred students) and victims have the opportunity to tell their side of the story. The peer jury members act as representatives of the community. The referred student is asked to reflect on who he believes was harmed in the situation and in what way. The outcome of the hearing is that all students work together to come up with an agreement (which is the equivalent of a disciplinary action) that works to undo the harm that was caused in the incident, and build the offender's skills so that the incident does not re-occur.

One of the examples that we used to capture our school community's imagination around restorative justice was the Restoring the Pieces project. There were 3 key components to this project: (1) a genealogy project lead by Mr. Tony Burroughs, (2) a mentorship process was facilitated through peace circles process conducted by Cheryl Graves of the Community Justice for Youth (CJYI), and (3) through the "Choosing your Legacy" Mosaic on the North Wall of the Cafeteria which was facilitated by Carolyn Elaine and the Fenger Community. Through the mentorship project, CJYI was chosen to conduct a series of Peace Circles are rooted in the philosophy of Restorative Justice. The Peace-making Circles which is an indigenous practices, are used to bring people together in a way that everyone is respected and by speaking uninterrupted while others listen. It is a method of communication that is used to celebrate successes, discuss challenging topics, make decisions or address wrongdoing. Participants sit in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else. Typically there is an opening ceremony that differentiates the time in the circle from time outside it and a talking piece is used to encourage active listening and to facilitate speaking openly and honestly. Participants determined the guidelines around how they will be in circle and all decisions in the circle are

made by consensus. The circle is closed with another short ceremony honoring the time and contributions participants have made.

CJYI offered this process to youth after school on Tuesdays. During this time, youth participated in “check-in” circles. Each participant shared how their day went among other things. CJYI also brought other trained circle keepers/mentors to share with the student participants and offered supports through this circle process. Thursday evenings (5-7:30p) was the community participation component of the program. During this time, community members from around the city were invited to Fenger High School to sit in Circle with our youth. The community members included our church members, parents and circle keepers from around the city. These participants were invited by the adult participants in the program to come weekly to the school. This was an opportunity for the community to add their voices to the inter-generational dialogue around peace and community engagement. This was also an opportunity to introduce to the community the restorative justice practice of Peace Circles.

The Genealogy component was lead by Tony Burroughs who is a professor at Chicago State University. Tony is a renowned genealogist who has worked on a variety of projects to help individuals trace their family histories. Tony’s work on this project revolved around the student and adult participants retrace their family histories using different techniques and methods. These methods included but not limited to using genealogy software from Ancestry.com to assist the participants in retracing their family histories. He also had participants conduct autobiographical interviews of each other and each of the students received CDs of their interviews for each of their families.

All of these components worked together in the creation of the Mosaic project. The artistic process came from the discussions the students had in Circle and the genealogy project. The artist then created a model that came out of the conversation from the students and adults involved in this project. With the help of the students from Architecture class and students from around the school community, the design was drawn on the North wall of the cafeteria and the students were organized into teams who worked on different aspect of the projects. These teams were organized to break mosaic tile, cut mirrors, placing the pieces on the wall, placing the pictured tile on the wall and cleaning the mosaic tiles.

As apart of the ‘Community Day’ celebration, Christian Fenger High School hosted a Peace Rally which was held in the cafeteria. The Peace Rally was done in collaboration with the Balance and Restorative Justice Committee at Juvenile



Court. Members from Juvenile Court as apart of their B.A.R.J. week came out to support of our youth stopping the violence and increasing the peace. There were over 300 students and adults in attendance. Once the Peace Rally was over, all of the participants were then ushered to classrooms to be apart of Peace Circles facilitated by trained Circle Keepers from the Restorative Justice community in Chicago.

On the following day, Fenger High School hosted the 'Community Day' celebration. During this celebration, alumnae, community members, staff, student leaders and artist from around the city came to grout the mosaic wall. The event drew news media documenting the coming together of the Fenger community to complete the "Choosing your Legacy" mosaic. Everyone that was apart of the 'Community Day' event helped the Fenger High School community gather together in a positive and peaceful way.

Finally, the core student leaders and core adult mentors came together to reflect during their final community circle at Fenger High. Students as well as adults shared their hopes and dreams for their school and community. They supported each other and celebrated the meaning of this project and the journey this project took us all on. Many of the adults asked if this could be done on a more consistent basis. The students hoped that they could continue to meet and talk about the future peace projects at Fenger High School. In the end, the group left with hope for the future for Christian Fenger High School and the Roseland community.

What I learned from this experience was that collaboration was key to ensure the success of this project. Our community needed a point person to coordinate the many people that would eventually achieve our goals at the school and community level. And we needed key people with specific skills to work together to support our school community moving forward. And finally we need the this to be a child focused process that put the needs and the feelings of the children first. Here was an opportunity to bring unity into our community and show our youth that we were ready to change our approach to you and listen to you. This is truly when our school began to turnaround and move toward its bright tomorrow.

In conclusion, the question that came to my mind as I thought how to expand this work in our communities was can this restorative healing process ripple out of the school community and into the homes and neighborhoods where our students live? How can we encourage these practices to continue after school and during the weekend? Are their places in our community where Restorative practices are accessible to our community to gain respect and healing for our residents? Can

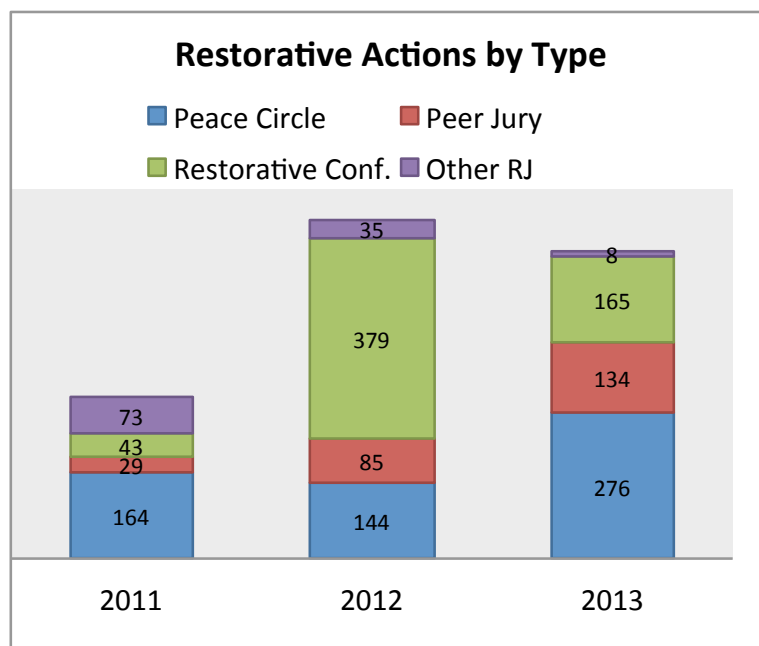
places like this flourish in a community impacted by violence? Who can be seen and respected by a community affected by violence as the person who can lead community away from violence toward peaceful ways to resolve conflict? What are the process and steps to doing this and can we replicate what we did in Fenger out in the community? For now these questions are continuing to drive myself and others toward a society that is willing to focus on our most precious resource—our children.

## Appendix

### Data

## Restorative Justice Practice

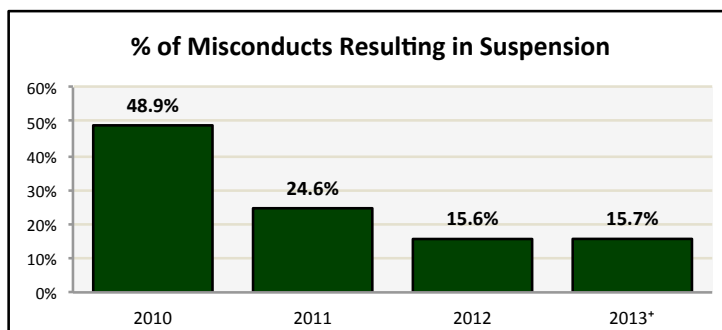
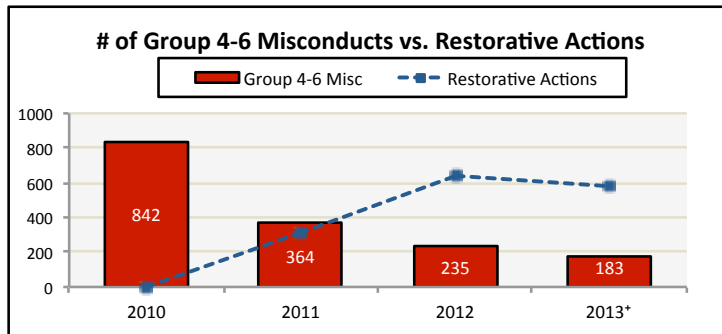
Fenger HS, 2011-2013



- Restorative Justice practices at Fenger are Peace Circles, Restorative Conferences, Peer Jury, Family Group Conferences, and Victim/Offender Mediations. These practices have worked to build community and repair harms at Fenger

# Restorative Justice Practice

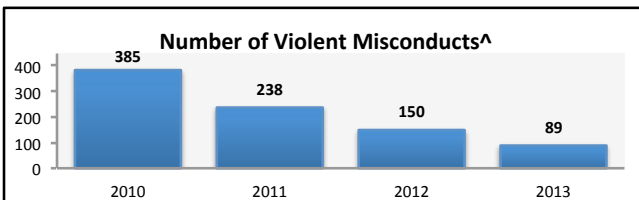
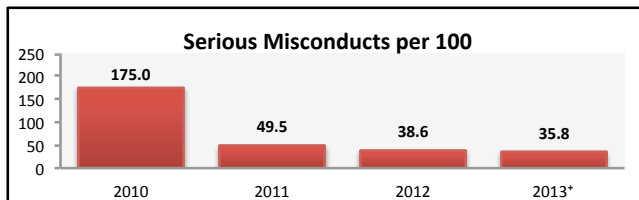
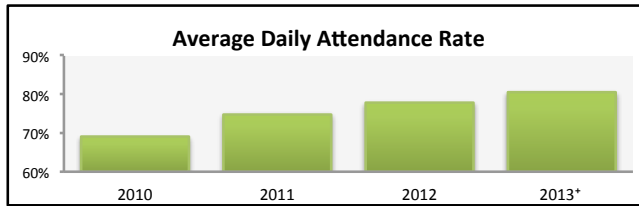
Fenger HS, 2010-2013



- Since Restorative Justice Practices have been implemented at Fenger, there has been a significant drop in Misconducts in Group #4-6. Suspensions have dropped as well as moving Fenger away from zero-tolerance and toward Restorative Practices.

# School Climate Overview

Fenger HS, 2010-2013



The Average daily attendance has increased over 10% and our serious and violent misconducts have decreased over the four years as a turn-around school.