

Safe and Inclusive Schools

Inclusive Classrooms

Children learn best when they feel safe and supported, and their learning is impaired when they are fearful, anxious, or traumatized. The ability to take intellectual risks and experience struggle in the process of deeper learning is built on a foundation of affirmation, mastery experiences, psychological safety, and a sense of belonging. From the community to the classroom, children's developmental contexts matter a great deal.

Cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development are intertwined, which means that threats to one threaten the others. A synthesis of research on the educational implications of the science of learning and development confirms that:

* Learning is social, emotional, and academic. Relationships and environments matter profoundly. When they are positive and trusting, they open the mind to learning. When they are negative and threatening, they dampen the brain's processing power. A child's best performance occurs under conditions of high support and low threat.
* Adversity affects learning—and the way schools respond matters. A child suffering from excess stress may experience anxiety, depression, lack of focus, and difficulty with memory and executive functioning. Schools can help to relieve these challenges or may reinforce them. Implicit bias, stereotyping, punitive discipline, and exclusion, all of which disproportionately affect marginalized students, become additional sources of trauma for children who are already suffering. On the other hand, caring adults and wraparound supports can be sources of resilience and healing. Warm, consistent, and attuned adults support positive brain development, even buffering children against other sources of adversity.

Wraparound Supports

In a school designed for whole child equity, such as a full-service community school, students have access to nutritious food, health care, and social supports; strong relationships; educative

and restorative disciplinary practices; and deeper learning opportunities that are designed to activate and engage them while supporting their motivation and self-confidence to persevere and succeed. Such resources are especially important when students are grappling with poverty and toxic stress.

Designing for overall well-being makes it possible for children to learn in deep, meaningful, and lasting ways. Community schools offer a purposeful design and an evidence-based approach to advance whole-child education by offering integrated supports for physical and mental health, as well as social services of many kinds; expanded and enriched learning time before and after school and in the summer, as well as community connections to project-based work in the classroom; family and community engagement through home visits, parent–student–teacher conferencing, and regular communication with classroom teachers or advisors; and collaborative leadership and practices that engage staff, families, and community organizations in a common understanding of child development that guides joint efforts. Together, these features have been found to support stronger attendance, achievement, and attainment in high need communities.

Restorative Practices

One particularly problematic practice is the use of exclusionary discipline that removes students from the classroom through punishments such as suspensions and expulsions. This practice increased dramatically in the United States as a result of zero-tolerance policies that use such approaches even for the most minor offenses, including nonviolent “misbehavior,” such as tardiness, talking, texting, sleeping in class, or failing to follow instructions, with little consideration of the context and underlying causes of these behaviors. Research has found that suspensions — which are significantly higher for students of color and students with disabilities — lead to disengagement, academic losses, higher dropout rates, and a school-to-prison pipeline.

Restorative practices have proved successful in making schools safer without suspensions, reaping benefits for student achievement and graduation rates in the process. Urged by the Office for Civil Rights as an alternative to school exclusions, these practices “proactively build healthy relationships and a sense of community to prevent and address conflict and wrongdoing.” Restorative practices create caring school relationships by infusing SEL and community-building activities into the school day through community circles and other processes for sharing events and feelings and by enabling access to supports when they are needed. In addition, they allow students to reflect on their behavior and make amends when needed to preserve the health of the community, drawing them closer rather than pushing them away.

Restorative Practices at Bronxdale High School

Bronxdale High School is an inclusion high school serving 445 students, about one quarter of whom are students with disabilities, in a low-income community of color in New York City. The once chaotic site is now a safe, caring, and collaborative community in which staff, students, and families have voice, agency, and responsibility and from which students are graduating and going on to college at rates higher than their peers across the city. At Bronxdale, community building — accomplished through SEL work in advisories, student-designed classroom constitutions, and affirmative supports in all classrooms — is integral to the school's successful restorative approach.

Rather than using a behavior management system to keep the school and students under control, Bronxdale's approach creates a safe, respectful environment through a youth development strategy that helps students develop pro-social ways of responding to the stresses and tensions that affect them in their daily lives — skills that will serve them well in forging successful, productive, and satisfying lives going forward. The approach is both educative (creating positive norms and teaching useful strategies) and restorative (able to repair harms).

As Principal Carolyne Quintana noted, restorative practices have value only when there is something to restore, and that something is "the community, relationships, and harmony." As one student commented, "We're connected.

Students and teachers care about you." Still another stated, "Every student in this school has at least one relationship with a teacher." Much of the foundational work is done in advisory classes, which are led by teachers and other professional staff and supported by student leaders in the school, who receive training to do so. By creating spaces for students to share feelings and make their coping strategies explicit, advisories allow community members to share knowledge and skills to support each other.

The approach includes teaching social-emotional and conflict resolution skills, enabling responsibility, and implementing restorative and empowering practices such as peer mediation, circles, and youth court. A student explained that at Bronxdale, "You get a chance to fix what you did. They don't suspend you." Another remarked, "Here we learn about consequences. In other schools, we would get punished for everything." At the core of Bronxdale's conception of the restorative approach are the staff's positive beliefs about and their faith in the fundamental worthiness of students.

School leaders note that, although kids sometimes have problems, they are not themselves the problem. The principal's goal is to help staff shift to the idea that "kids do what they can. If they can't, it's because they don't know how." By helping students understand that they can choose their responses and can think in new ways, which gives them more choices, the staff support students in imagining, learning, and adopting pro-social behaviors. The outcome is a

school in which students take care of each other and are prepared to handle difficulties, both by using the strategies they have learned and by seeking out assistance from others.

Source: Adapted from Ancess, J., Rogers, B., Duncan Grand, D., & Darling- Hammond, L. (2019). *Teaching the way students learn best: Lessons from Bronxdale High School*. Learning Policy Institute.

As this example from Bronxdale High School illustrates, restorative practices also support deeper learning as students learn to reflect on their feelings and actions, develop empathy and interpersonal skills, and engage in increasingly sophisticated problem-solving within their school community. Such environments can motivate students to come to school. Once they get there, it is critically important that they experience thoughtful and effective teaching in every classroom, another challenge in many schools.