

Written Testimony to Senate Judiciary Committee

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RE: [H. 675 Draft No. 3.2 \(4/9/18\)](#) Sec. 4. Restorative Justice Principles for Responding to School Discipline Problems

April 17, 2018

Dear Honorable Committee Members....

I have studied and applied restorative justice principles for 20 years. In that time, I've played a critical role in the design, application, and enhancement of restorative justice within diverse settings. I've focused considerable effort on supporting Vermont schools in their exploration and implementation of restorative approaches and wrote the [Whole-School Restorative Approach Resource Guide](#) that was submitted to the committee on April 6 by Senator Sears.

I am excited to see advocacy and support for the application of restorative justice principles in Vermont schools in the legislature.

For the record, while I wholeheartedly support the application of restorative principles in schools, I oppose requiring that schools adopt a policy on the use of restorative justice principles for responding to school discipline problems—currently part H. 675.

The very promising research on restorative approaches coupled with disturbing data on students excluded from education and the disparities that exist within that data creates an urgency to act.

It is important to understand that application of restorative justice principles in schools is not just about discipline reform. The field has learned to not start there. The schools that demonstrated the remarkable outcomes in the [Whole-School Restorative Approach Resource Guide](#) section on “Outcomes linked to Restorative Approaches” did not start by applying restorative principles to discipline. They began by creating the conditions to establish a healthy school culture and climate. Restorative practices intentionally and proactively engage the school community to build relationships, connection, and a sense of belonging for *all* in the school. In many cases, it's two – three years before a focus on discipline reform. We have learned that if schools focus only on discipline reform they just end up putting out fires; this does little to change the conditions that are in many cases at the root of behavior referrals.

Requiring schools to push policy that people do not understand will not achieve the outcomes desired; it will further misunderstanding regarding restorative principles. Creating a mandate to do this is contradictory to the very principles being espoused.

This committee does have power and influence. To implement restorative practices with fidelity, schools need resources that allow them to build capacity through professional development, modify existing infrastructure, and manage and evaluate the change process and resulting outcomes. If this is mandated instead of being resourced it will fail. I recommend supporting the significant momentum that already exists in the state.