

Written Testimony to Senate Education Committee
From: Jody Emerson, Associate Principal of U-32 Middle & High School
Restorative Practices in Schools
February 22, 2019

Good afternoon, my name is Jody Emerson and I am the Associate Principal of U-32 and have been an administrator there for 6 years now. I am also an International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Trainer, a member of the Washington County Restorative Practices in Schools (WCRPiS) group, and a member of the Community Advisory Board for the Montpelier Community Justice Center. Currently, working on a masters in Restorative Practices at IIRP. As Associate Principal, I am the primary administrator responsible for reconciling disciplinary actions at my school.

I was asked to speak about restorative practices at U-32 and by extension of our district, Washington Central Supervisory Union (WCSU).

About 8 years ago, one of our school counselors, Ellen Cooke, attended the World conference at IIRP and the 2 day training on Restorative Practices (RP). This sparked her interest in bringing it to U-32, which at the time, she believed needed a climate shift. In addition, Ellen met Stacey Miller, Director of Residential Life at UVM, who was the Keynote Speaker at the conference. Following that experience, Ellen met with her administrators and advocated the need to bring restorative practices to U-32. Although the Principal at the time did not move to bring RP to U-32, neither did he stand in the way. Student Services was able to write some of the restorative language into the U-32 action plan and contracted with Stacey Miller and Dennis DuPaul to provide the training to some teachers, students, and an Assistant Principal. Most of the early work at U-32 was in Tier 1 circles. When I arrived as a new administrator at U-32, I was informed that restorative practices were used as part of the discipline process. That said, there was nothing written into the school handbook at the time and I did not receive formal training until the summer of 2015. I learned what I could from the other Assistant Principal and the question cards.

Our current Principal, who arrived after my first year at U-32, attended an RP training coordinated by Ellen, and determined that restorative practices was indeed the right model for improving U-32's climate and culture. Also, in his second year at U-32, he set a two year timeline for all of our teachers to be trained in RP and even supported members of the school community, including myself, to become licensed trainers. Since then, we have provided the two day Restorative Practices training for all new teachers as part of a week long orientation. This includes Tier 1 and Tier 2 circles training.

At U-32, we require that teachers use Tier 1 circles regularly in TA and assess them through observations, and also recommend that teachers use Tier 1 circles with their classes. We have trained over 100 students in the last three years and currently have a 7 student restorative panel in the high school. Our Superintendent, Curriculum Director and Director of Special Services have been trained along with 3 of our 5 Elementary Principals, and several school counselors

throughout our district. This year we trained five, 6th grade students with the hopes that they might support the transition from 6th to 7th grade, and take part in a middle school panel we would like to start next year. WCSU intends to train more of our elementary staff in the coming year, as RP melds very well with their Responsive Classroom training.

Responsive circles are run to help resolve things such as a small conflict between students (he took my headphones and hid them), to incidents of bullying and/or harassment, physical altercations, etc. There have been circles with 2 students to circles with 40 students, working to resolve harm. We have had classroom circles, sports team circles and employee circles. Most of these circles have been facilitated either by our School Counselors or Administration, but several have been facilitated by students and some by teachers. We are struggling with documentation of how many circles take place in our school throughout the school year. There were at least 11 facilitated circles in September, with the same in October, 6 in November, and 4 in December of 2018.

Several of those circles included something we call "community". Community replaced detention this year. In the past, a student who would have previously served a detention, where they might get work done or possibly sleep while staying after school, now takes part in community, having a conversation with myself and at least one of our student panel reps. We have had anywhere from 1 student serving community to 4 in one session. During that time, we use the restorative questions: What happened to earn you an invite to community? What were you thinking at the time? What have you thought about since? Who was impacted by what happened? What has happened and/or needs to occur to make things right and allow you to move forward? We have only had one repeat community guest this year. Thus causing a sharp decline in the number of community meetings this year, in comparison with detention last year. The restorative questions are also used throughout our interviews with students, are used with teachers when they have a concern, and across the board in my work. They allow us to identify what happened and the impact it had, while keeping us from getting stuck admiring the problem; they allow us to move forward with possible solutions. There are still consequences for the poor choices members of our community make. However, there is also an opportunity to repair the harm and move forward.

It's really important to note that U-32 built our climate and culture through a combination of Tier 1 and Tier 2 Restorative Practices - strong Tier 1 practices allow for the trust and community required to have meaningful Tier 2 and 3 processes. We participate in the Washington County Restorative Practices in Schools group to be a part of dilemma sharing between schools and to strengthen RP throughout the county. By doing this work, it has become clear that for RP to take hold in schools, administrators need to be on board and committed to using both Tier 1 and Tier 2 Restorative Practices. In addition, teachers need to be given the training to facilitate, at minimum, Tier 1 circles. The WCRPiS group and some referrals of U-32 students to Montpelier Community Justice has built my connection with them and we are currently moving forward with the development of a Community Youth Restorative Justice panel.

