ISD 287's Restorative Practices

Summary of Literature and Key Informant Interviews for School Year 2018 – 2019

Background

Intermediate School District 287 (ISD 287) provides intensive educational supports to its students. ISD 287 staff use a variety of practices to manage the school atmosphere, foster social connection, manage interpersonal conflict, and maintain school safety. Restorative practices comprise some of the tools that ISD 287 students, teachers, and staff use to create a safe, nurturing, and productive school environment.

Since the 2014 – 2015 school year, Wilder Research has been working with ISD 287 to evaluate restorative practices in the district. Past evaluation activities focused on:

- Documenting the number of restorative circles/chats (SY 2014 – 15)

- Developing a theory of change and logic model (SY 2015 – 16)

- Gathering and summarizing staff and student perceptions of restorative practices (SY 2015 – 16)

- Gathering and summarizing staff perceptions of restorative practices, including impact and possible improvements (SY 2016 – 17)

- Gathering and summarizing staff perceptions of how restorative practices fit with other approaches, the impact of restorative practices, and what supports would help staff feel as comfortable as possible using restorative and other practices (SY 2017 – 18)

Findings from past years drove the direction of the current evaluation work. In 2017 – 2018, Wilder researchers interviewed 15 district staff about what additional supports or trainings they needed to feel comfortable implementing restorative practices in their work. All mentioned that they needed more support from administration and district leaders, including:

- Offering more frequent restorative practices trainings, so that all ISD 287 staff are trained in restorative practices.

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- Embedding a restorative practices lead in each ISD 287 building.

- Facilitating greater communication across ISD 287 sites, so that staff can share learnings, debrief circles that did not go as hoped, and practice circles in small groups.

- Using restorative practices to advance the district's race equity goals.

Methods

This year's evaluation combines two means of data collection. Researchers first conducted a brief search of the literature to determine which student outcomes improve after restorative practices are implemented in schools, and how school district leaders can improve restorative practices use in their districts. Wilder staff then interviewed ten people in positions of leadership in ISD 287 to understand whether and how ISD 287 administration may be best engaged to support restorative practices in the district. We report the themes that arose from the literature, followed by information raised by two or more key informants.

Findings

Lessons from the literature review

Wilder Research reviewed six relevant sources; four were scholarly articles and two were restorative practices implementation guides. Sources raised common themes around the positive benefits of restorative practices in schools, and how school and school district leadership can improve restorative practices use.

Restorative practices improve student outcomes

All sources reviewed included information on which student outcomes seem to improve after a school or school district implements restorative practices. Four sources included a review of studies of restorative practices in schools, and two were resource guides for those looking to implement restorative practices in schools. Sources described what changed after a school or school district implemented restorative practices, including:

- Improved school climate

- Increased student connectedness

- Greater community or parent engagement

- Improved student academic achievement, including improved reading and state test scores, and decreased high school dropout rates

- Improved school attendance, and a reduction in tardiness

- Improved student and staff relationships

- Fewer disruptive and unsafe behaviors, including fighting and bullying
- Fewer behavior referrals, discipline disparities, suspensions, and expulsions

One research review noted

> *All the empirical studies we reviewed report a decrease in exclusionary discipline and harmful behavior after implementing some type of restorative justice program. (Fronius et. al 2016, p 20)*

School district leaders can improve the use of restorative practices in their districts

Five sources included information on what school, or school district, leaders can do to improve the use of, and/or outcomes from, restorative practices. To support restorative practices, school and district leadership can:

- Integrate restorative practices into a school's overall philosophy, culture, or ethos
- Integrate restorative practices into a district's formal policy and procedures
- Ensure successful funding, implementation, and evaluation of restorative practices
- Provide ongoing training for staff, students, and families in restorative practices, including their values and strategies[1]
- Debrief restorative practices processes and outcomes with staff, students, and families
- Collect relevant data, including community-building circles, restorative circles (including who made the referral for a restorative circle and for what behavior), and punitive discipline data (suspensions, etc.)
- Model expected behaviors when interacting with staff and students
- Communicate with restorative practices stakeholders
- Engage in continuous quality improvement, which includes reflection, and documenting plans, challenges, changes, and outcomes

Sources indicate that the steps above can mitigate and prevent some challenges to implementation, including cessation of use of restorative practices, and also bolster the positive student outcomes described above.

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[1] Note: one study found that teachers benefit most from professional development that is at least 20 hours spread over a semester (which promotes change in practice), and that includes opportunities to practice skills, link practices to teacher knowledge or skills, and that includes follow-up support. Mayworm, A. M., Sharkey, J. D., Hunnicutt, K. L., & Schiedel, K. C. (2016). Teacher consultation to enhance implementation of school-based restorative justice. Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 26(4), 385-412, p 397.

Perspectives from district leadership

Key informants' roles, and tenure in the district

Wilder researchers interviewed ten people who hold leadership roles in ISD 287. Some key informants worked in more than one capacity (for instance, had both teaching and district-wide leadership responsibilities). Key informants held a variety of roles, including being principals at different ISD 287 school buildings, practicing as district-wide clinicians, leading the district's equity efforts, and teaching. At the time of the interview, four key informants had worked in the district for 2 to 3 years, and four had worked in the district for 5 or more years.

Respondents know about, and value, restorative practices for a variety of reasons

Wilder staff asked key informants about their familiarity with the restorative practices work in the district. All had some knowledge of restorative practices. Some informants use restorative practices, including circles, some had received restorative practices training, and some used practices that they saw as similar to restorative practices.

When asked how important they thought restorative practices were to creating a positive and productive atmosphere in the district, all interviewees agreed that restorative practices were superlatively important. Most interviewees found restorative practices to be indispensable, calling them "necessary," "vital," "essential," and "crucial," among other terms.

Unprompted, some interviewees expanded on why they thought restorative practices are really important, or necessary. These responses aligned with the positive outcomes from restorative practices noted in the literature. Respondents thought restorative practices were very important, or essential, to restore relationships, build relationships, and positively address conflict. Respondents mentioned that restorative practices benefit multiple stakeholders, including students and staff. Said some interviewees:

> *Everybody should be doing it . . . giving students and teachers the opportunity to restore in this way. It levels power dynamics between students and teachers, between teachers and administrators. I can't underscore how useful it is.*
>
> *[Restorative practices are] extremely important. The goal of the district is to reduce the [school-to-prison] pipeline and a lot of our students come with a history of being excluded. The foundation of being a community can be set by circles, and can be accessed by all of our students regardless of background, issues that impact them, or cognitive functioning. It sets the foundation through community-building and communication, and also helps us respond.*

Respondents have a mixed understanding of the district's commitment to restorative practices, and articulated some barriers to implementation

When asked how committed the district is to fully embedding restorative practices, some respondents thought the district was committed, and others were not sure. Interestingly, in response to being asked about the district's commitment, key informants pointed to things they saw as barriers to fully implementing restorative practices in the district, including not prioritizing professional development in restorative practices, lack of understanding of key players, or not understanding how restorative practices advance educational outcomes.

> *Lately, [a commitment to restorative practices] hasn't been happening as much, at least in my building. I haven't seen people outside the classroom leading and there hasn't been as much as an emphasis on training. It was a new thing and then has kind of fallen off.*
>
> *[One barrier is the] rigidity of time and expectations -- or the conditioning we have around what it means to be teachers, educating in schools. That rigid conditioning is systematic. Internally, personal conditioning makes it difficult to see that relationships are a focus for education and that's what restorative practices are all about.*
>
> *I don't know where [restorative practices] fall on the whole scale of all the things [leadership is] working towards. With things like equity and our strategic plans, we can only fill up so many professional development hours with so many things before we're overrun with info.*
>
> *Some people don't know who the [restorative practices] circle keeper is.*

Most respondents were not familiar with the district's restorative practices trainings

Interviewers asked district leaders how familiar they were with the district's restorative practices trainings. Only those who had been to a training indicated that they were familiar with trainings; eight informants had not been to a training and were not sure what restorative practices training looked like.

Most respondents agreed that the district could make improvements that would fully embed restorative practices

In a number of ways, district leaders expressed support for changes that could improve restorative practices in the district. Wilder researchers first asked informants if they had any ideas about how to improve fully embedding restorative practices in the district. This was an open-ended question; informants could raise more than one improvement. Next, Wilder researchers asked informants if they supported various improvements that teachers and staff had raised in previous years. Most informants expressed support for these improvements (Figure 1).

1. Ways to improve restorative practices in ISD 287

Improvement	Number of interviewees who suggested this theme in response to open-ended question	Number of interviewees who expressed support in close-ended question
More frequent restorative practices training	5	9
More frequent opportunities to practice circles	4	7
Create a restorative practices lead at each site	2	6
More frequent opportunities to share learnings from circles and practices across sites	—	7
Use restorative practices to advance district's race equity goals	—	8

When asked about a specific improvement, most respondents expressed support for the idea. Some elaborated more on why they did or did not support an improvement.

More frequent training:

> *There is turnover. We're constantly hiring. We'll run people through other training but not necessarily restorative practices training. In my building, restorative practices has been pretty much handled through a set of people. Not everybody does it; it's through the people that have gone through the training. My preference is that everybody gets trained so we're on the same page.*

More frequent opportunities to practice circles:

> *A lot of our staff – they think restorative practices training is a PowerPoint, and don't get that it could happen practically in circles. It'd be great to do circles to train people through the experience, and then it would also do the community building.*

A restorative lead in each building:

> *I thought we had a team that was trained in restorative practices in the district so I thought we had folks already assigned to that. I don't know if they would need to be in one site. I think if they can respond to need and go to a site. It's more important to have the right people to do the work and capacity to do the work than to have an actual body in the building.*

> *I like the idea of having that lead, along with the expectation that the adults in the building are still equipped to do it. Restorative practices can't live in one person.*

> *I think it's a great idea. The cultures building to building are really different. Someone who's there day to day would be in the best position.*

More frequent opportunities to share learnings from circles and practices across sites:

> *I love it -- that's the biggest issue we have is the lack of debrief on anything. The administration has been talking about how we make sure we close the loop, debrief things, it's just the time issue again.*

> *That's great. It'd be wonderful to have if we had the time to do it. We embed other practices into what we do, so I'd love to be able to embed the restorative practices in there. Maybe where I could be trained more so that I can put it in -- I'd love to get strategies for how to make that happen.*

Use restorative practices to advance district's race equity goals:

> *[Staff] say that just to say it; they're not quite ready yet to get into this work. The equity team [stopped] because they weren't ready. When they make these statements [that teachers want to use restorative practices to advance race equity], I think it's what they want us to hear, but I don't believe they're speaking the truth about that, because if they were we wouldn't be in the predicament that we're in. It's not all staff, but it's still a system issue.*

> *I would love for the folks who lead the circles -- it doesn't need to be two separate things, there's going to be intersectionality and difficult things that come up and using the same protocols that we use to address racial issues -- it doesn't have to have to be two separate things. We've talked about how similar the approach is. There's a big overlap in dealing with race in restorative practices.*

Respondents shared ideas of what would need to change in order to advance improvements

Wilder researchers also asked what changes would need to be made at ISD 287 in order to advance a specific improvement. Researchers asked this question five times over the course of the interview, and respondents were free to name as many changes as they wished. Informants named changes that would help advance improvements to the district's use of restorative practices (Figure 2.)

2. **Changes needed to drive improvements**

District changes to drive improvements	Number of times this change was named, over 5 open-ended questions
Prioritizing restorative practices, including through administrative buy-in, in meeting agendas, by making their use mandatory in classrooms, and in prioritizing hiring those with restorative practices familiarity/experience	15
Training more teachers, staff, and leaders in restorative practices	15
Re-imagining position descriptions	7
Securing more resources, including money and social workers	5
Emphasizing the importance of restorative practices	2
Ensuring that restorative practices are implemented with fidelity	2

Some elaborated on the change that they suggested.

Prioritizing restorative practices:

> *Because of the needs that we're trying to meet at the district, a reduction in actual student contact time so that staff can work on their own skills set could be explored as an option.*

> *If it's a priority for the district, we'll focus on it. I think it's more of a top-down type of thing, the district needs to make it a priority and here's the plan. Then building leads can plan around that.*

> *As far as professional development days -- there's so many things to get packed in, specifically for 287, our students are here because they're not able to regulate or effectively solve differences. It needs to be given a higher priority – not just restorative practices, but anything involving mental health or social-emotional skills. When they're thinking about how to structure professional development days, we of course want them to improve math and literacy, but they can't do that unless they're able to regulate.*

> *I would love to see a commitment -- this district is really strong when it comes to thinking outside the box and accepting new ways of thinking and doing. And then that needs to be followed with some level of expectation and accountability. This work isn't an option, it's a responsibility if you want to work in the district.*

Training more teachers, staff, and leaders in restorative practices:

> *I think we need to look at how we onboard. We have new staff all the time. We're constantly responding to needs, and sometimes we need placements in days, and have to hire one to one, the process is different from other school districts. We'd have to change the time to onboard staff before they're put into a site -- it's so hard to make that happen especially if it's a one-on-one hire that happens in days. Somehow we have a virtual format would be helpful. We can't do traditional all the time, face to face, we're not a traditional district.*

> *If the district really wants it, it'll be part of the evaluation process and then everybody will get trained in it. They've got to set the direction and also make the tough decisions about how to measure it and what else they can take off people's plates.*

Re-imagining position descriptions:

> *More social workers, just assigning someone to do that, and making sure they have the ability to be free to do that. If you can't hire more SW, don't say they're in charge of something if they don't have time to do that.*

Securing more resources:

> *I would add another 20 hours a week for restorative practices in my building in a heartbeat, but time and money are barriers to be overcome to make that happen.*

Emphasizing the importance of restorative practices:

> *In working with our kids, a lot of laws that we have to follow, a lot of things that come at people. When you boil down to what works for these kids -- for all kids -- it's forming relationships. If you can't form a relationship with a kid you don't belong in our building. And restorative practices can form all kinds of positive relationships.*

Ensuring that restorative practices are implemented with fidelity:

> *I hope they're using restorative practices with fidelity and not just saying 'that didn't work so we're not going to use it.' The classes that do circles regularly thrive, even with students that haven't been successful anywhere else, because the circles are a way to be welcomed to this new community as well as deal with behaviors. We're so focused on math and reading that we forget that kids aren't here because they're not good at math. They're here because they have other things going on that restorative practices, when it's done with fidelity, really help with.*

Most respondents had ideas of who else to involve in restorative practices in the district

Researchers asked informants if they knew of other stakeholders or funders that could be engaged to advance ISD 287's restorative practice work. Leaders could mention as many ideas as they could think of, and most responded. Ideas of who else to engage included:

- Minnesota Department of Education, including to explore Safe School funding

- Other agencies who are already in ISD 287 buildings, including mental health service providers, Individual Education Plan partners, and School Resource Officers

- Student Safety Coaches

- Parents/caregivers

- Other member districts

- Culturally specific organizations, including the NAACP

- Organizations and businesses near ISD 287 schools

Exploring who else could be engaged in ISD 287's restorative practices work, leaders said,

> *I think the NAACP and other Black organizations that would be engaged -- that want to see change in education and interested in volunteering in multiple fashions. My hope is to bring the Vice President of the NAACP to talk to our students in kind of an advisory capacity. There are diverse organizations with agendas to support kids of color in education, and that are super culturally competent. Also, the ideas of community, collectivity, and a less hierarchical structure fit right inside the cultural orientation of Black Americans.*
>
> *We have some contracted people and it might be helpful to have them at the table. Our co-located mental health services, like People, Inc., and Headway. We've got case coordinators, rehabilitation people, and a family therapist that work with our students, too. All those agencies are so darn busy, too. With everything we're doing – the mental health pieces are so significant, so getting everyone on the same page with restorative practices could be beneficial.*
>
> *We've done restorative chats with School Resource Officers when they were here. People who are third party agencies to our building having those chats, it fits with the Individual Education Plan processes. And having those conversations with parents who think slightly differently -- we have a very robust work experience program and have restorative practices chats with students struggling with the work sites. So much of the things we know about restorative practices -- they really work in all those contexts.*

Next steps

Based on suggestions from the literature and interview themes, we recommend:

- If not already doing so, reading and acting on restorative practices implementation guides

- Reflecting on ISD 287's hiring metrics, professional development priorities, and communication structures, to prioritize restorative practices experience, training, and debriefs

- Building restorative practices into school policies and procedures, including investigating whether restorative practices shall be used in classrooms

- Reflecting on ISD 287's continuous quality improvement processes, to prioritize collecting and using data relevant to restorative practices implementation, outcomes, and improvement.

- Collecting relevant restorative practices data, including the percent of time that District Mobile Response Team members spend on proactively advancing restorative practices in the district (v the percent of time spent responding to conflicts or behaviors), the number of teachers attending restorative practices trainings, and a survey on restorative practices use in the district

- Understanding and reflecting on areas of alignment between the literature and ISD 287 key informants, to assess how ISD 287 is best positioned to advance improvements mentioned in the literature (Figure 3).

3.   Aligning methods to improve restorative practices

Improvement mentioned in the literature	Improvement or change raised by ISD 287 informants
Integrate restorative practices into a school's overall philosophy, culture, or ethos	Emphasize the importance of restorative practices
Integrate restorative practices into a district's formal policy and procedures	Prioritizing restorative practices, including through administrative buy-in, in meeting agendas, by making their use mandatory in classrooms, and in prioritizing hiring those with restorative practices familiarity/experience
Ensure successful funding, implementation, and evaluation of restorative practices	Ensuring that restorative practices are implemented with fidelity; securing more resources, including money and social workers
Provide ongoing training for staff, students, and families in restorative practices, including their values and strategies	More frequent restorative practices training; more frequent opportunities to practice circles; training more teachers, staff, and leaders in restorative practices
Debrief restorative practices processes and outcomes with staff, students, and families	More frequent opportunities to share learnings from circles and practices across sites
Collect relevant data, including community-building circles, restorative circles (including who made the referral for a restorative circle and for what behavior), and punitive discipline data (suspensions, etc.)	Ensuring that restorative practices are implemented with fidelity

3. Aligning methods to improve restorative practices (continued)

Improvement mentioned in the literature	Improvement or change raised by ISD 287 informants
Model expected behaviors when interacting with staff and students	—
Communicate with restorative practices stakeholders	More frequent opportunities to share learnings from circles and practices across sites
Engage in continuous quality improvement, which includes reflection, and documenting plans, challenges, changes, and outcomes	More frequent opportunities to share learnings from circles and practices across sites