

What Restorative Justice is NOT

Restorative justice in education is a movement that is rapidly gaining traction in many school districts across the country. While the shift away from zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline is welcomed and necessary, people often have very different understandings about what restorative justice entails. This brief tool seeks to clarify some of the most common misconceptions by outlining what restorative justice is not based on underlying non-negotiable principles.

Restorative Justice is not...

★ Simply a response to conflict

Most of the work of restorative justice is community building and progressing toward establishing true communities of learning. Repairing harm and returning ownership of conflict to those impacted by it is only one aspect of the larger restorative justice paradigm.

★ Being soft on students or eliminating consequences

Restorative justice requires students and adults to authentically engage with any harm they have intentionally or unintentionally caused to another person. The consequences are directly linked to that harm and agreed upon by all of the individuals involved. Arbitrary punishments and removals are not restorative, but the natural consequences are very real.

★ Classroom management

Adopting a restorative justice philosophy will improve classroom culture and interpersonal relationships; however, using a responsive restorative strategy without first building the underlying foundational relationships will only result in disappointment. There must be a relationship and community to restore to.

★ Punitive

Though this may seem obvious, restorative justice is not meant to be a punishment and is not a way to reframe or rename damaging programs. Meaningful alternatives to punitive approaches take time and trust. They should be collaborative and creative; reflecting the voices of young people, educators, and families.

★ An intervention/ A program/ A set of prompts/ A band-aid

Restorative justice is a comprehensive philosophy. It is not something you do; it is who you are as an individual and as a collective. The commitment to restorative justice has to be built over time. It cannot be mandated or forced; it must be based on the particular needs and strengths of your community.

★ Something you can finish

Just as restorative justice is not a program, it is not a quick fix - something you can implement and complete. A restorative organization can achieve its goals AND engage in ongoing evaluation, responding to and incorporating feedback from all stakeholders.

★ Limited to circles

While peace circles are an important and impactful element of restorative justice implementation; they are not the only restorative justice practice. Anything that centers relationships, strengthens community, and involves those directly impacted can be part of a successful restorative culture.

★ A means of empowering already privileged families and students

Restorative justice creates space for those directly impacted to speak. It is a process involving those who have a stake in the community and/or conflict, ensuring that all voices are heard. Young people and families already engaged with and knowledgeable about their education system do have a role and a voice, but space must be created for marginalized communities who are often excluded from conversations and decision-making.

★ Inherently anti-racist

One of the most crucial goals of restorative justice implementation is reducing racial disproportionality in a given system, but this requires intentionality. Restorative justice can replicate problematic patterns in discipline if disproportionality is not consciously and actively addressed through disaggregating data, examining this data throughout the year, and providing ongoing professional development.

★ Meant to fit comfortably into our current education systems

Our existing education systems are not built for this work. For a true restorative culture to take root, the system has to bend to accommodate the time and resources needed to undertake a full mindset shift. Trying to fit restorative justice practices into education systems that we know aren't working for many students, undermines their integrity.