

# Talking circles foster positive school culture



JOSHUA BESSEX, BUFFALO NEWS

Fourth-grader Jaxon Bodine reads off the rules as he helps lead a restorative circle and check-in session at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School.

## Restorative practices curb Cheektowaga-Sloan troubles

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Students sat on a rug in Kristina Knaub's fourth-grade classroom at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, eager to demonstrate to a bunch of curious adults the power of a restorative circle.

Jaxon Bodine, an exuberant student leading the circle, read a list of guidelines, then handed a red stress ball to a classmate beside him. All were welcome to share, one by one as the ball came to them, how they were feeling that day.

Cheektowaga-Sloan Schools Superintendent Andrea Galenski asked afterward what they liked about circles, and Knaub's class rattled off answers.

"It makes you braver."

"It's such a good way to share about how we feel, our mood."

"It's seeing how other people are different from one another."

Dina Thompson, chief executive officer of the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition and restorative leader, believes efforts including an uplifting check-in circle or a face-to-face conference after a serious incident build or repair relationships, and are vital to establishing a positive school culture. Thompson guided Cheektowaga-Sloan in implementing restorative practices during the last five years.

"Students need to be seen or heard," she said. "This is about how you talk to each other."

A daily circle does not grab headlines in the way restorative justice – which seeks to keep kids in school, but often demands uncom-

fortable accountability – does because of its clashes with the traditional disciplinary approach of school suspensions.

Proponents of restorative practices emphasize that removing students from the classroom increases their likelihood of negative outcomes, such as jail time, but may not address a problem's root cause. The restorative approach is countercultural to America's criminal justice system, which is based on the traditional model of discipline, several people interviewed noted.

Restorative practices have curbed behavioral problems and built a positive culture in Cheektowaga-Sloan, said Janelle Finn, assistant superintendent and head of a district committee on restorative practices.

Comparing statistics for September through December for 2021 to 2023, John F. Kennedy High School saw drops exceeding 75% in disciplinary and insubordination referrals; 77% in physical and verbal altercations; and 40% in suspensions that last more than five days.

"It's a shift of power and authority to relationship-building and respect," Finn said.

Results are similar at Randolph Academy, a small two-campus school that works with students with behavioral and emotional disabilities in small classes. Former superintendent Lori DeCarlo committed to a restorative approach in 2015, and during the last decade, fights have decreased by 96%, and suspensions and discipline referrals dropped 40%.

"It's the cornerstone of our program," Randolph Superintendent Danielle Cook said. "We focus the entire school community on building relationships, and using those relationships to teach behaviors."



# Restorative

From AI

## Rock bottom with Covid-19

Pandemic-related learning disruptions rattled Cheektowaga-Sloan, leaving students isolated, parents frustrated, teachers limited and administrators burned out.

"People were not well," Finn said. "We all weren't well."

A full-time return to the classroom in 2021-22 wasn't a magic elixir.

"The kids weren't ready to come back," Finn said. "We lost track of kids, kids didn't come to school or they came to school part-time. It was very challenging."

Galenski and Finn agreed that school year was the hardest of their careers. Superintendent's hearings, required for students suspended five days or more, were frequent. Thirteen members of the senior class dropped out. JFK's 84% graduation rate was the lowest since 2017.

"We anticipated the kids would come back with challenges, but it was more than we even thought," Finn said.

Cheektowaga-Sloan was equipped with the basics of restorative practices, however, to provide a launching pad to combat social-emotional strain.

### 'We're doing this'

Two years before Covid-19 struck, a Cheektowaga-Sloan counselor attended a community training by the Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition.

The work of ECRJC, a nonprofit and not a county affiliate, extends beyond schools. Thompson said she, eight employees and 25 volunteers work in courts and detention centers, with human resource departments across several industries, and in the East Side to help healing from the May 14, 2022, racist mass shooting.

Schools are a focus of her work for a reason.

"Education propels children into strong or negative spaces," Thompson said. "Their emotional intelligence will take them further than their IQ will, and that's developed in school."

Thompson led Cheektowaga-Sloan's faculty and staff through restorative training a few days before school started in 2019. The large group was split into small circles and given a set of prompts. Galenski and Finn recalled initial discomfort.

"Picture how nervous they were, people are reporting on Day One, leaving their summer behind - you could hear a pin drop," Galenski said.

It did not take long until the embrace of the circles by employees gave the administrators hope.



Students in Kristina Knaub's fourth-grade class share how they are feeling during a restorative circle and check-in session at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School on Feb. 9.

JOSHUA BESSEX PHOTOS, BUFFALO NEWS

"Just seeing them engaged in these circles," the superintendent recalled. "I thought, 'This is a no-brainer. We're doing this!'"

### Implementing restorative practices

The positive introduction set the wheels in motion: Finn formed a District Restorative Practice Committee, which received thorough training from Thompson. Once the districtwide team grasped check-in circles, Finn assigned building-specific restorative liaisons at Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt Elementary and JFK middle and high schools for school-based ownership. The train-the-trainer model has trickled down to students. Several are now capable of leading circles.

These daily check-ins, such as those at Woodrow Wilson, are not fancy. There are no screens. When asked if they helped develop friendships, the sizable group of 9-year-olds in Knaub's class said yes, in unison.

Circles are malleable - they may be light or heavy. Knaub's class emphasizes monthly themes: Students throughout January determined goals for the year, then spent February reflecting on things they love. But if students are having trouble respecting rules of the bathroom, that can be a circle topic, too, Galenski said.

Earlier this year in Caitlin Rice's fifth-grade class, students passed around a yellow ball and shared a story of something they had to overcome. One fifth-grader said her cousin forced her to ride the Superman rollercoaster at Darien Lake, then added her grandfather died when she was 4 years old. It sparked a powerful moment be-



Assistant Superintendent Janelle Finn, left, and Superintendent Andrea Galenski visit Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, where restorative practices helped to combat social-emotional strain from the pandemic.

tween the student and Rice, who said she had to overcome her father's death.

At JFK middle and high schools, circles look different. Galenski built a 17-minute advisement period into the middle of the day, where teachers meet with the same group of 12 students for the whole year.

The district made progress in restorative justice, too. Students can have their long-term suspensions reduced if they participate in a restorative conference, typically with the other person in the conflict, but often also with parents, teachers, student support staff or administrators. The nature of the infraction often dictates who needs to be invited. Restorative conferences have become such a prominent tool at JFK middle that students request them, Galenski said.

Why is a conference preferable to suspending a student, or at least necessary to integrate a

suspended student back into a classroom?

"It's easier for a kids to sit home for a couple days on suspension than it is to own up to what they did and accept responsibility," Finn said. "That's what they want to do sometimes - they want to sit home."

Thompson disputes that restorative justice is a soft approach.

"In the country we live in, truth is hard," she said. "It can bring about shame and fear, emotions that people try to avoid altogether."

### Not without challenges

Instilling restorative practices will likely be ineffective if an entire school or district does not buy into the philosophy, according to a National Education Association report. That transition requires not just resources, personnel and engaging community partners, but months of training and

a desire to transform a mindset. "When we first started this, the impression was, 'Oh, great - kids are going to get away with things,'" Finn said. Some teachers were reluctant to try circles or skeptical a student would take seriously a meeting about conflict resolution. Not every student was enthusiastic about gathering in circles. "Kids would put their hood down and say, 'Pass, pass, pass,'" she added.

Teachers have gradually warmed to the concept, Finn said.

"They used to hate after some incident happened and the kid just shows up again in their room," she said. Conferences have "brought peace to teachers - 'We need to have a conversation, we need to do something,' they'll say. If they don't want to be in a circle, they don't have to. But most people want it."

Buy-in continues at Randolph Academy, which has a decade of experience. Fidelity has been Cook's focus for three years. She explains restorative practices as a teaching tool, not necessarily a replacement for traditional discipline, which has quieted some critics.

Large urban districts such as Buffalo Public Schools face a steep climb to implement restorative practices. Thompson has trained several Buffalo administrators and, thanks to grant funding, her organization worked in five of the district's 60 schools in 2022-23. It is in just one - the high-needs Academy School - this school year. Despite discussions, there is no solid plan as to how ECRJC will be involved elsewhere in the district next school year.

Thompson said her nonprofit is nearing partnerships with three other districts for next year. Intrigue spread through word of mouth has allowed ECRJC to be selective, she said.

"We want them to have the tenaciousness to go through it," she said, "when it's hard."

### Moving forward

At Cheektowaga-Sloan, Galenski and Finn credit Thompson for laying the groundwork to meet social-emotional challenges that Covid-19 worsened. They stress that complete adoption of restorative practices has strengthened relationships among students and between students and teachers.

Better relationships lead to fewer suspensions. In the first six months of this school year, Galenski held just three in-district superintendent's hearings.

"Knock on wood, it's the best we've ever seen it," Galenski said of school discipline. "At one point, we were hyperventilating."

Finn added that she hopes it will foster academic improvement, too.

"This is the journey of a culture change," Finn said. "It is not simple work. It's hard, and we're still in that process. But we have seen it come so far."