



# Restorative Practices Beyond the Classroom: Integrating Circle Practices Into Existing School Processes

## RESTORATIVE PRACTICES

Lan Nguyen | 2022

*This brief was written while the author was living and working on the traditional and unceded ancestral homelands of the Kumeyaay (known today as San Diego), who have cared for the land since time immemorial.*

**R**estorative practices, which draw on the philosophies of global Indigenous cultures, contribute to the development of a positive school climate by centering relationships, participatory engagement, and a humanistic approach to discipline. Although restorative practices in schools are generally discussed in the context of alternatives to traditional punitive disciplinary measures for students, they include a range of both proactive practices that build community for the entire school and responsive practices that focus on repairing harm. The International Institute for Restorative Practices describes them as “an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities” (n.d.).

The ethos of restorative practices is illustrated in one of their core processes—circles. They can be used in a variety of ways, including community-building, problem-solving, teaching and learning, and responding to harm. The structure of circles creates an environment for all voices to be heard, particularly those from historically and currently marginalized groups.

While circle practices can vary, there are some common principles in how they are typically set up. Seating is nonhierarchical to

lessen power differentials among participants. The group collaboratively develops agreements that set the foundation for the discussion. A circle keeper facilitates the discussion and ensures that agreements are adhered to. Talking pieces are used to determine the order for speaking and ensure equity of voice.

This brief focuses on integrating circle practices in spaces beyond the classroom. When implemented effectively, circles are a powerful and highly adaptable way to conduct the everyday business of schools in an inclusive, collaborative, and effective manner.

## Implementing Restorative Practices

Restorative practices are most impactful when used not only as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures for students but also as a comprehensive approach to cultivating positive school climate and culture among staff, teachers, and students. A comprehensive, multitiered approach involves incorporating restorative mindsets in all members of the school community (e.g., leaders, teachers, staff, and others) and in all aspects of the school's structures, processes, and policies.

A common challenge to effectively implementing restorative practices in schools is insufficient administrative support. To have effective implementation, school leaders need to model and embody restorative principles and philosophies (Gregory et al., 2021). Modeling restorative practices as a leader sends a powerful message to all members of the school community. As many practitioners and advocates assert, restorative practices represent a “way of being” (Hurley et al., 2015). So, what might this way of being mean for school leaders, and their staff and teachers, in their day-to-day work?

## Integrating Circles and Other Restorative Practices Into Existing School Processes

Restorative mindsets become a way of being for educators when they have plentiful opportunities to experience and experiment with circles and other

restorative practices. Implementing the practices described below with school staff and other adults is a powerful way to reinforce restorative values with all members of the school community. As staff members gain practical experience with circles, they are more likely to use them with students in their own classrooms. In this way, integrating these practices serves to both model and teach.

### *Individualized education program (IEP)/504 meetings*

During IEP/504 meetings, a community of adults—including educators, administrators, caretakers, and support staff—comes together with the purpose of better supporting a student. Circle processes are a natural fit for IEP/504 meetings. Consider beginning the meeting with a check-in question followed by a discussion about the strengths of the student. Allow space for the student to share about their hopes and goals as a starting point to inform possible supports.

### *Staff meetings*

Set opening routines and rituals for staff members as they enter and leave staff meetings. These rituals help staff members transition from their busy days and be more present. These routines and rituals could include opportunities to connect with colleagues, a mindful moment, and/or check-in questions.

Circle processes can also be used to facilitate discussion about a variety of topics, such as setting school-wide goals, welcoming new staff members, gathering input, and celebrating successes. Many more circle prompts and processes for staff are detailed in the book *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community* (Boyes & Pranis, 2015).

### *Committee meetings*

For committees that meet regularly over a period of time, it is useful to incorporate community-building activities and practices to facilitate trust and effective collaboration as they work to reach their goals. For example, using circles during English Learner Advisory Committee or School Site Council meetings can help members feel more comfortable and

connected. This increases the likelihood that they will communicate more openly as they provide input on English Learners, programs, school data, expenditures, and other areas. Consider which items on the agenda require discussion and input from all members, and align circle activities accordingly. For instance, depending on the size of the committee and the time available, it can be productive to hold smaller discussion circles simultaneously. Then, each small group can designate a spokesperson to share out with the entire committee on their behalf. This process saves time and ensures all members have an opportunity to share their perspectives.

### *Online meetings and interactions in virtual spaces*

Restorative practices can be especially helpful in humanizing online meeting spaces. Technical features such as virtual breakout rooms can be used to create groups of all sizes quickly and easily. Consider designating circle leaders in each breakout room to lead the discussions.

It may also be helpful to develop agreements specific to online meetings that help to facilitate connection in a virtual environment. During in-person circles, a talking piece typically serves as an indicator of who is speaking and who will go next. This can be replicated by having attendees type their names quickly into the chat box to determine the order for speaking. Creating predictability for sharing and listening eases the hesitation of group members who may be more reluctant to speak up.

In addition to the meetings and processes outlined above, school leaders should consider different spaces and forums in the school where groups of adults work together consistently over time. It is likely that these spaces would benefit from more intentional community-building through circles and other restorative practices.

### **Using Circles to Find Solutions at Ross Elementary School (San Diego, California)**

As schools reopened amid the pandemic, Principal Rosemary Cruz from Ross Elementary School identified the need to address staff members' concerns about returning to in-person learning. Accordingly, staff members at Ross Elementary engaged in a series of virtual circles over the course of several weeks to build community, communicate their needs, and think about ways they could support each other. As everyone learned more about each other over the course of the circles, they became more comfortable with sharing the support they felt they needed.

Several staff members shared their hesitations about the new technology that they would be required to use to conduct simultaneous in-person and virtual lessons. Organically, fellow classroom teachers offered their assistance to each other to set up the new equipment. Principal Cruz also solicited input about different opening procedures and received valuable feedback that helped her to see the issues from different angles and hear from colleagues who were usually less vocal.

The relationships and community-building fostered within these circles ultimately created fertile conditions for collaboration and mutual support among staff beyond the circles. Although many of the staff members at Ross Elementary had previously attended training on restorative practices, the opportunity to experience them firsthand increased their confidence in trying the practices in their own classrooms.

“Using circles with my staff has helped us to build trust and work better together even when we might disagree. Staff members have also taken on these practices more often in their classrooms. It has just become a part of what we do.”

—Principal Rosemary Cruz

For school leaders who want to shift their schools toward restorative paradigms, it is important to model restorative behaviors and processes and integrate them into the school's everyday practices. When school leaders play an active role in the restorative practices that they are aiming to implement—that is when they practice “showing, not telling”—they are more likely to foster authentic engagement among school staff and others in the school community who may be skeptical (Trout, 2021).

Most importantly, using restorative practices, such as circles, with staff members provides them with experiential opportunities to understand the potential of restorative practices for developing community and connection in the classroom and throughout the entire school community. Implementing restorative practices in a sustainable way requires investing meaningfully in the development of the mindsets and practices of all school community members—especially adults.

© 2022 WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Nguyen, L. (2022). *Restorative practices beyond the classroom: Integrating circle practices into existing school processes*. California Center for School Climate at WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org).

## References

- Boyes, C., & Pranis, K. (2015). *Circle forward: Building a restorative school community*. Living Justice Press.
- Gregory, A., Ward-Seidel, A. R., & Carter, K. V. (2021). Twelve indicators of restorative practices implementation: A framework for educational leaders. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 31*(2), 147–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2020.1824788>
- Hurley, N., Guckenberger, S., Persson, H., Fronius, T., & Petrosino, A. (2015). *What further research is needed on restorative justice in schools?* WestEd.
- International Institute for Restorative Practices. (n.d.). *What is restorative practices?* <https://www.iirp.edu/restorative-practices/what-is-restorative-practices>
- Trout, L. (2021). *The toolkit before the toolkit: Centering adaptive and relational elements of restorative practices for implementation success*. Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd.

## Resources

The resources in this section can support school leaders as they develop restorative mindsets and apply circle practices with their staff.

- » [\*The Toolkit Before the Toolkit: Centering Adaptive and Relational Elements of Restorative Practices for Implementation Success\*](#): a guide for educational leaders to integrate restorative mindsets and values into all aspects of school life
- » *Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community*, by Carolyn Boyes and Kay Pranis: a practical resource that provides ideas, prompts, and topics for implementing circles with staff and students