



California  
Center for  
School Climate



AUDIO GALLERY

## Castle Park Middle School

Chula Vista, CA

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# MAKING SPACE: EDUCATOR LISTENING CIRCLES

Restorative justice and restorative practices have become increasingly popular in schools in the United States as an alternative to exclusionary discipline models.<sup>1</sup> The International Institute of Restorative Practices defines restorative practices as including informal and formal tools, practices, and processes that build, maintain, and repair relationships.<sup>2</sup> Compared to traditional disciplinary approaches that focus on responding punitively to disciplinary challenges, restorative practices proactively create the conditions for community trust and strong relationships. Although many educators and schools are quick to implement technical elements of restorative practices, such as restorative circles and community conferences, research indicates that restorative practices are most effective when they are integrated into the school's overall philosophy, supported with the appropriate resources and tools,<sup>3</sup> and rooted in relationships and ways of being.<sup>4</sup>

Chula Vista's Castle Park Middle School is an example of a school community that centers relationships and belonging through a restorative frame by taking intentional actions to build relationships, foster agency, and cultivate community.<sup>5</sup> Science teacher and Climate Culture Committee member Melissa Rains described how school staff members take a holistic approach to working with each other and with students: "We see each other as more than just teachers... We see our students as more than just students. We see them as whole people." These sorts of positive relationships across the school community contribute to safer and more supportive and equitable learning environments.<sup>6</sup> Teachers can build trust with their students—and school leaders with teachers—by authentically listening to their experiences and expressing curiosity about their lives inside and outside of school.<sup>7</sup>

This cultivation of trust is essential for the effective implementation of restorative practices, especially when harm and conflict inevitably arise.

Even in this close-knit school community, increased levels of stress and burnout following the COVID-19 pandemic have impacted Castle Park educators' ability to manage the academic, mental, and social-emotional needs of students. Nationwide, teachers and superintendents have reported a rise in disruptive student behaviors since the pandemic with 84 percent of teachers saying that students are developmentally behind in self-regulation compared to students prior to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Castle Park was no exception, with even experienced teachers like World Cultures teacher Roberto Barraza sharing that he sometimes struggled to feel like he was able to do his job well: "I felt like I wasn't doing enough... But listening to other teachers share their experiences, it wasn't just me. We all felt like sometimes we were just spinning our wheels."

To support teachers who are experiencing high levels of stress and showing the signs of burnout, Castle Park leadership refocused their efforts to prioritizing staff well-being by creating space for them to connect with each other in restorative listening circles. To ensure that staff felt comfortable enough to share their experiences Castle Park worked with Luis Ruan, a neutral intermediary from the National Conflict Resolution Center with a background in restorative justice. The listening circles created a structured space where teachers were able to voice their emotions, struggles, and hopes.

People realized, 'Oh, I'm not alone in these experiences.' And they had a chance ... to come together and realize we were having a collective experience rather than an individual experience.

MELISSA RAINS

From a restorative practices paradigm, agency is key to healing and repairing harm through accountability.<sup>9</sup> Although Luis recognized that the main goal of the listening circles was for the teachers to "be heard," he knew that for the circles to be healing the school would need to make changes based on what was shared. Members of the Climate Culture Committee identified and shared common themes from the listening circles with administration, including the need for clarity with the student discipline process, better communication, and greater support in the classroom. This process helped inform the decision to pilot another whole-person initiative—Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support—to address the increase in challenging classroom behaviors. The listening circles also had the effect of improving school climate by helping staff members see that their voices and well-being matter,<sup>10</sup> as this work moved Sweetwater District to recognize the need for a staff well-being center on campus. Anecdotal evidence also indicates an increased sense of belonging and collective self-efficacy among Castle Park educators. When restorative practices are truly embedded in a community, the result is not just the resolution of harm and conflict, but the proactive cultivation of authentic relationships and belonging.

## Resources

- [\*The Toolkit Before the Toolkit\*](#) (Trout, 2020).
- [\*Creating a Culture of Care\*](#) (Pate, et al., 2023).
- [\*Restorative Practices Beyond the Classroom: Integrating Circle Practices Into Existing School Processes\*](#) (Nguyen, 2022).

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### Consider while you listen . . .

- Educators have reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the amount of support that students need, which has created higher levels of job-related stress. Experiencing chronic stress and fatigue in the classroom leads to increased levels of educator burnout. **How does your site prioritize educator wellness and adult well-being? To what extent do these practices help prevent educator burnout? What interpersonal and structural supports can be offered to staff to ensure a positive work experience?**
- Castle Park used listening circles to strengthen relationships by creating space for staff members to share their experiences with each other and listening to staff voice for improvement efforts. **To what extent would educators in your school or district be open to sharing their daily experiences as members of the school community? How might your school or district develop the necessary trust to support a culture of sharing feedback for improvement? How might you address the feedback you collect to implement change?**

#### School Information

Number of students	744
Geographic setting	Urban
Grades served	7–8
School model	Traditional

#### Student Demographics

Latinx	84.4%
White	7.9%
Asian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4.5%
Black	1.3%
Multiracial	1.2%
Native American/Alaska Native	0.4%
Students with disabilities	17.6%
English language learners	37.8%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	80.0%

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, Ha., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2019). Restorative justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review. WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resource-restorative-justice-in-u-s-schools-an-updated-research-review.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Wachtel, T. (2016). Defining restorative. International Institute for Restorative Practices. <https://www.iirp.edu/pdf/Defining-Restorative.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> Fronius, T., et al. (2019).
- <sup>4</sup> 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. WestEd
- <sup>5</sup> Trout, L. (2021).
- <sup>6</sup> Pate, C., Pfister, T., & Ripma, T. (2023). Creating a culture of care: A guide for education leaders to develop systems and structures that support educator well-being. WestEd.
- <sup>7</sup> Hammond, Z. L. (2015). Culturally responsive teaching and the brain. Corwin Press.
- <sup>8</sup> EAB. (2023, February 16). Two New EAB Surveys Reveal Troubling Trends in Student Behavior. EAB. <https://eab.com/insights/press-release/district-leadership/two-new-eab-surveys-reveal-troubling-trends-in-student-behavior/>
- <sup>9</sup> Trout, L. (2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Kahlenberg, R. D. & Potter, H. (2014). Why teacher voice matters. AFT. [https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg\\_potter\\_sb](https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2014-2015/kahlenberg_potter_sb)