

UR education research focuses on urban schools' conflict resolution

By **DIANA LOUISE CARTER**

An urban education center at the University of Rochester has published new research on the restorative justice model of conflict resolution using experiences from three schools – including two in Rochester – in hopes that schools around the country might benefit.

The research, titled “Becoming Restorative: Three Schools Transitioning to a Restorative Practices Culture,” is available on the website of the Center for Urban Education Success, part of UR’s Warner School of Education. Valerie L. Marsh, assistant director of the center, wrote the research brief.

Restorative justice practices are aimed at solving conflicts through letting all participants be heard, replacing the traditional punitive system in which students are banished from the classroom or school because of disruptive behavior without necessarily considering the causes.

“Schools rely on a punitive model, which is more similar to treating people with punishment as you would a criminal,” said Marsh. “Not only does it make people feel bad, but it doesn’t work. Students are unable to reintegrate back into the community after they’ve been suspended. It doesn’t lower the incidents of suspension.” And even prisons are starting to use restorative justice practices, she noted.

The education researcher looked at how restorative justice is being used at the World of Inquiry School No. 58 and East High School, both in Rochester, as well as at Leadership & Public Service School in New York City.

Key findings were that adults in the build-

ing have to buy into and use restorative practices before they can become effective, and the culture shift takes time – often years. Further, the school needs to provide leadership and support, including financial support, for adopting new practices.

“It’s a sea change in the way everyone treats each other. Because it’s based in ... compassion and being heard, this idea of everyone getting their say,” the practice is more attractive to parents than being summoned to school to pick up a disruptive child, Marsh said. “I found when parents are brought in to these (restorative justice talking) circles, it levels the playing field. It’s an empowering experience.”

Schools that are successful in changing their culture are the ones in which adults incorporate these practices into the ways they deal with each other, Marsh said, such as having talking circles in their regular staff meetings, whether there is conflict or not. But the practices can resolve adult issues too.

“For example, at East, they began rolling out their training with teachers and administrators. They found out several months later that some of the cafeteria staff and the school security officers felt left out,” Marsh said. The school used restorative justice practices to talk about that and then ended up including those groups of staff in the training too.

Although the practice was new at World of Inquiry at the time, principal Sheela Webster insisted on using it to resolve an incident two years ago when a rural school’s pupils shouted racial epithets at WOI soccer players during a match.

“It was like the blind leading the blind, but I had faith that if you brought people



Valerie L. Marsh

together and you could have a facilitator that helps you to articulate what you were feeling, we would come to a peaceful resolution,” she told Marsh.

Adopting the new practices can also have a negative impact as some staff resist change and end up leaving a school. The report indicated a wave of turnover happened at the New York school when the principal advocated strongly for using restorative justice practices.

The urban education center at UR is just a year old, Marsh said, and younger than UR’s partnership with East High. But by posting its research about successes in urban education, it hopes to have a wider impact than the university working with a single school.

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