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## Summary

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Recent studies have concluded that exclusionary discipline practices like suspension might be impeding student success. Correlational studies have shown a link between suspension and lower student achievement (Skiba et al., 2014), and suspensions are associated with involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Fabelo et al., 2011; González, 2012; Skiba et al., 2014). Suspension was found in one study to be the top predictor of students dropping out of school (Flannery, 2015). Correlational data show that in the United States, controlling for demographic and academic variables (e.g., family income, immigration status, test scores), the estimated graduation rate for suspended students was 68 percent compared to 80 percent for non-suspended students—a 12-percentage point difference (Rumberger and Losen, 2016). Harsh discipline for minor or subjective infractions has contributed to high suspension rates. Some studies have found that most offenses for which students are suspended are non-violent (Skiba et al., 2014), including tardiness, absence, and disrespect (González, 2012).

Additionally, studies show that African-American students are suspended at higher rates than white students. A report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA documented large racial disparities in California's school districts, noting that African-American students were disproportionately dealt the harshest exclusionary penalties (Losen, Martinez, and Gillespie, 2012). A study of three years of discipline data for an entire state found that while school-level differences accounted for most of the variation in discipline, African-American students received longer punishments than white peers for the same offenses even in the same schools (Anderson and Ritter, 2017).

The use of restorative practices in schools has been suggested by policymakers and practitioners as both an alternative to exclusionary practices and as a mechanism for improving student behavior, thus reducing the need for suspensions. Restorative practices grew out of the use of restorative justice in the criminal justice system. Restorative justice relies on the basic notion that people are connected through a web of relationships, and that when harm occurs between people, the web of relationships that creates a community is torn (Zehr, 2002). In practice, restorative justice brings together victims and offenders to discuss the harm, the impact it had, and what needs to be done to reestablish the relationships that form the community (Zehr, 2002; González, 2012).

Restorative practices in schools include many specific program types and do not have one monolithic definition in the literature; they are broadly seen as a non-punitive approach to handling conflict (Fronius et al., 2016). Restorative practices both prevent harm through relationship-building and respond to conflict in ways that repairs damaged relationships (González, 2012; Kline, 2016).

A number of descriptive reports and correlational studies suggest positive outcomes of implementing restorative practices in schools. These include lower suspension rates, improved school climate, and improved student attendance. However, none of these studies used experimental methods, which leads to questions about the validity and generalizability of their findings.

## Study Context

Pittsburgh Public Schools is the second largest school district in Pennsylvania, serving approximately 25,000 students in kindergarten through 12th grade in 54 schools. In July 2014, the district submitted a proposal to the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to implement restorative practices. They called their initiative, “Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities,” which is commonly referred to by the acronym PERC.

In its proposal, the district argued that schools needed to be safer. The district’s 2013-14 student survey data demonstrated that 18 percent of students believed that they must be ready to fight to defend themselves, 35 percent felt angry about the way adults treated them at school, and 22 percent believed that student misbehavior slowed down learning. Additionally, 20 percent of all students and 28 percent of African-American males were suspended during the same school year. The district considered these suspension rates problematic for three reasons: (1) they backed up the notion that PPS schools were not safe places, (2) disparities in suspension rates raised questions about equity (both in terms of treatment and achievement) for African-American students, and (3) the overall rates suggested long-term negative impacts for a sizeable proportion of PPS students, given the literature on the negative associations with exclusionary disciplinary practices.

## PERC Implementation

Upon receipt of the NIJ grant, PPS contracted with the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) to implement the IIRP’s SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program. The program is grounded in what IIRP calls 11 essential elements. Table S.1 presents these elements and a definition of each taken from IIRP’s program literature (IIRP, 2011). As the name of this model implies, all staff in a school building are to learn how to enact almost all of these essential elements (with the exception of restorative conferences, which might only be run by a few school administrators).

A few themes run through these elements, including the importance of communication, responsibility, restoration, and separating the “deed” from the “doer.” Students (and school staff) communicate with each other both to build positive environments and to respond restoratively to disruption. Those who do the disrupting learn to take responsibility for their actions, while those affected learn to describe the impact on them. Those who commit harm are also expected to make reparations, which might include issuing a formal apology, or even doing some type of

service work in the school where the incident happened. It is also important to note, even with restorative practices in place, that students who commit an offense that warrants suspension based on district or school policy are still suspended; students are still held accountable for their actions and punished appropriately. But in applying these consequences, school staff are taught to separate the harm that was done from the person who did it, being careful not to imply that the person, even if suspended, is a bad person who does not belong in the community. Restorative practices also provide strategies schools can use to welcome the student back after a suspension and re-integrate them into the community.

**Table S.1 The Eleven Essential Elements of the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change Model**

<b>Element</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Affective statements	Personal expressions of feeling in response to specific positive or negative behaviors of others
Restorative questions	Questions selected or adapted from two sets of standard questions designed to challenge the negative behavior of the wrongdoer and to engage those who were harmed
Small impromptu conferences	Questioning exercises that quickly resolve lower-level incidents involving two or more people
Proactive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that provide opportunities for students to share feelings, ideas and experiences in order to build trust, mutual understanding, shared values and shared behaviors
Responsive circles	Meetings with participants seated in a circle, with no physical barriers, that engage students in the management of conflict and tension by repairing harm and restoring relationships in response to a moderately serious incident or pattern of behavior affecting a group of students or an entire class
Restorative conferences	Meetings in response to serious incidents or a cumulative pattern of less serious incidents where all of those involved in an incident (often including friends and family of all parties) come together with a trained facilitator who was not involved in the incident and who uses a structured protocol
Fair process	Outlines a set of transparent practices designed to create open lines of communication, assure people that their feelings and ideas have been taken into account, and foster a healthy community as a means of treating people respectfully throughout a decision-making process so that they perceive that process to be fair, regardless of the outcome
Reintegrative management of shame	Process of listening actively to what a shamed person has to say, acknowledging the feelings of the shamed person, and encouraging the shamed person to express his/her feelings and to talk about the experience that brought about the shame response
Restorative staff community	A community that models and consistently uses restorative practices to build and maintain healthy staff relationships
Restorative approach with families	Consistently uses restorative practices in interactions with students' family members
Fundamental hypothesis understandings	Understanding the Fundamental Hypothesis that human beings are the happiest, healthiest and most likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in authority do things <i>with</i> them rather than <i>to</i> them or <i>for</i> them

Source: IIRP, 2011

Staff in the selected treatment PPS schools received training on and support in implementing restorative practices in several ways. As part of the SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program designed for PPS, IIRP provided four days of professional development; all staff in the selected schools (aka PERC schools) were asked to attend two of these days and the other two were voluntary. Throughout the two-year implementation period, IIRP distributed books on restorative practices to all selected school staff and videos, posters, and other supporting materials to each PERC school. Each principal was assigned an IIRP coach to support the school during the two-year implementation period. Principals were asked to establish restorative leadership teams (RLTs) and the IIRP coaches were asked to schedule monthly calls with these teams to monitor progress and address challenges. The IIRP coaches also visited each of their assigned schools at least twice during a school year. All PERC school staff were asked to participate in monthly professional learning groups (PLGs). The district’s restorative practices project manager provided additional support to the selected schools including supplementary materials and individualized coaching.

## Study Overview

PPS asked RAND to evaluate PERC. During the course of this two-year study, we chronicled implementation and assessed outcomes. The following three research questions guided our work:

1. How was the PERC model implemented and what challenged and facilitated use of restorative practices?
2. What were the impacts of PERC?
3. How likely is it that PERC will be sustained in PPS?

We set out to describe implementation and determine what features of it supported teacher and staff use of restorative practices. To build on current research, we examined several ways in which PERC might impact students, teachers, and schools, including student and teacher attendance, suspension rates and disparities therein, student and teacher perceptions of school climate, and academic achievement. We also documented district efforts to scale and sustain PERC. We summarize potential challenges the district may face and make recommendations for the district based on our study’s data.

It is important to understand what we evaluated. Our study examined a specific restorative practices program—IIRP’s SaferSanerSchools™ Whole-School Change program—implemented in a selected group of PPS schools. However, the district offered additional support on restorative practices, over and above the program prescriptions, such as monthly meetings for school leaders and book clubs for parents. Some of the schools also offered additional support to staff, such as training on recognizing and responding to trauma. Moreover, the use of restorative practices varied among individuals. Although, on average, use was high, not every staff member used the practices and we do not know how many or which students experienced restorative practices, nor to what degree. Neither do we know the extent to which the control schools were

implementing restorative practices, or something similar. These details are important to consider when contemplating our findings.

## Study Approach

We employed a randomized controlled trial to study PERC outcomes and collected qualitative data on implementation. The final sample contained 44 schools, evenly split between treatment (aka PERC school) and control. We collected implementation data through observations of IIRP trainings, surveys of PERC school staff, observations of restorative practices in four case study schools, and interviews of school, district, and IIRP staff. We also obtained administrative data from the district and the county. We collected data during two years of implementation: Year 1 spanned June 2015 (when training began on PERC for school staff) through June 2016, and Year 2 spanned June 2016 through June 2017. Our impact analyses included outcomes at the student level (suspensions, arrests, attendance, mobility and achievement), the teacher level (composite teaching performance, value added and student ratings of their teachers) and the school level (teacher ratings of teaching and learning conditions).

## Study Limitations

There are limitations to this study related to the timeframe, setting, and scope. Some other studies of restorative practices span three to even seven years (e.g., Gonzalez, 2015). Here, we are examining outcomes after two years of implementation. We do not know if there is an ideal number of years of implementation to achieve desired outcomes, but two years may be insufficient. This evaluation is most relevant for mid-sized urban school districts; our findings might not apply to other settings. Despite the study's fairly large scope, it does not address all questions of potential interest. We lack a direct measure of student opinions about PERC and rely on school staff to provide us their opinions of student reactions and engagement. And we were unable to access referral data. The use of restorative practices may be affecting the number of student referrals to the office for low-level behavior disturbances. Our interviews represent a very small percentage of PERC school staff (approximately 6 percent); these interviewees' perceptions and experiences cannot be generalized further.

There are also limitations that arise from the study design and data availability. Randomization does not guarantee treatment and control samples that are perfectly equivalent on baseline characteristics, and this can be a particular limitation for analysis of the impact on subgroups of the population. We also are limited in the information we have about the connections between particular students and staff, which limits our ability to investigate whether student outcomes were better if staff used restorative practices more fully.

Finally, as noted earlier, we do not know about disciplinary practices in the control schools. We imagine that business as usual in our 22 comparison schools might have included restorative

practices. We did not conduct surveys in these schools that would allow us to compare and contrast their context to those of the PERC schools.

## Key Findings on Implementation and Outcomes

### *Implementation Strategies to Build Capacity Were Successful*

As described above, staff in the PERC schools received training on and support in implementing restorative practices in several ways. Most of these efforts appear to have paid off. Almost all PERC staff developed at least some understanding of restorative practices over the two-year implementation period. Staff bought into these practices at the end of Year 1 and this buy-in did not flag. Staff used restorative practices often, particularly by means of affective statements, proactive circles, and impromptu conferences and/or responsive circles. In the PERC schools, averaging across both years of implementation, 49 percent of staff reported using affective statements often or always, 69 percent reported using proactive circles often or always, and 44 percent reported using impromptu conferences or responsive circles often or always. And use of restorative practices increased in the second year. This may be partly because staff were confident that they understood and could use restorative practices; their confidence grew in the second year as well.

Staff who attended the PLGs, received coaching from IIRP, and/or received support from a school leader were more likely to use restorative practices. So were staff who reported that they understood the essential elements of restorative practices. This understanding was associated with participating in the PLGs. The biggest reported barrier to implementing restorative practices was time; both for learning the practices and then for using them.

### *PERC Improved the Overall School Climate, as Rated by Teachers*

We found strong evidence that PERC had positive impacts on teachers' perceptions of teaching and learning conditions. Teachers' responses to the district's Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey indicated significantly higher ratings of conduct management, teacher leadership, school leadership, and overall teaching and learning conditions in the PERC schools than in control schools. The impact of PERC on conduct management is driven by the positive and statistically significant impact on responses to items about whether faculty work in a safe environment and whether they understand policies regarding student conduct.

PERC staff also reported in our survey that they had stronger relationships with students because of restorative practices. An interviewee noted, "I do feel like the kids are more willing and forthcoming with their problems and information to adults. I feel like some of them do consider us to be more of an ally to them." Finally, although classroom climate ratings, based on the district's annual administration of the TRIPOD student survey, were lower in PERC schools

overall, teachers who used restorative practices were rated not significantly lower by their students than those in comparison schools.

### *PERC Reduced the Average Suspension Rate for PERC Schools, as well as the Disparities in Rates by Race and Income*

Although suspension rates have gone down in the district overall in the past few years, PERC further reduced both the number of days students were suspended as well as the number of suspensions. Not only were PERC students less likely to be suspended, but they were less likely to be suspended multiple times. In non-PERC schools, days lost to suspension in the district declined by 18 percent from the 2014-15 SY to the 2016-17 SY, but in the PERC schools, they declined by 36 percent. Another way to look at suspensions is by the percentage of students who were suspended. In the 2014-15 SY, 16 percent of students were suspended. In the 2016-17 SY, 15 percent of students were suspended from non-PERC schools. In the PERC schools, only 13 percent of the students were suspended. Moreover, PERC reduced the rate at which students were sent to alternative schools. Students in the PERC schools experienced more school days because they were less likely to be suspended or transferred to other schools than were students in the control schools.

Suspension rates of African-American students and of those from low-income families also went down in PERC schools, shrinking the disparities in suspension rates between African-American and white students and between low- and higher-income students. Suspension rates also decreased for female students.

The impact on overall suspension rates was driven by lower rates in PERC elementary schools. Elementary students also had higher attendance rates, which partially reflects fewer suspensions but also reflects fewer other types of absences and therefore might be an indicator of improved school or classroom climates in these PERC schools.

It is difficult to know if student behavior improved because of PERC, or if schools were choosing to punish students without suspending them, or both. Surveyed PERC staff did not think that PERC was impacting student behavior. However, they did report that their relationships with students had improved because of PERC. It could be that better student-to-staff relationships will lead to improved student behaviors over time, if that is not the case now.

### *Not All PERC Impacts Were Positive*

We found negative impacts of PERC as well. Despite fewer suspensions, academic outcomes did not improve in PERC schools. At the middle grade level (grades 6–8), academic outcomes actually worsened in the treatment schools. Neither did we find fewer suspensions in middle grades. It could be that it is more challenging for restorative practices to positively impact middle grade students, at least within a two-year time frame.

Neither did we see fewer suspensions for male students, students with individual education plans (IEPs), or for incidents of violence or weapons violations. Neither did we see a reduction in



arrests. It might be easier to implement a restorative punishment for non-violent behavior rather than suspending a student than it is to do the same when a student engages in violent behavior, which requires a suspension based on the district's code of conduct. This, of course, raises the question of whether restorative practices can be effective in curbing the most violent behavior, or at least within a two-year implementation period.

## Recommendations for School Districts

Because we do see reductions in suspension rates and in disparities in them by race and income, we consider restorative practices to be promising, particularly for elementary schools. We provide recommendations here for other districts considering implementing something similar to PERC.

- Given reports on the constraints on teachers' time, emphasize restorative practices that can be woven into the school day. Teachers can use affective statements while they are teaching, for example. They can also use circles to simultaneously build community and convey core academic content. The IIRP coaches had other suggestions for restorative practices that were not time consuming, such as standing at the door as students enter, welcoming each student by name.
- Ensure that school leaders understand and can model restorative practices. School staff who received modeling and/or feedback from school leaders were more likely to use restorative practices.
- Provide mandatory professional development (PD). The mandatory PD sessions provided on the basics of restorative practices and on how to run circles—an essential element of the practices—were well attended and highly rated by participants.
- Provide books and other materials on restorative practices. Staff acknowledged receiving and valuing these materials.
- Provide coaching by an experienced coach. Each PERC principal was assigned an IIRP coach to support the school during the two-year implementation period. Initially, the plan was for each coach to visit the school twice each year. However, principals requested more frequent visits and were allowed more in the second year. We do not know the ideal number of coaching visits, but two per year might be insufficient. The staff who interacted with these coaches were more likely to use restorative practices. In interviews, PERC staff noted the importance of having an external, highly practiced coach provide objective feedback and experience-based modeling.
- Establish a mechanism for school staff to meet at least once a month as a professional learning community on restorative practices. PERC school staff who participated in monthly PLGs were more likely to understand and use restorative practices.
- Ensure that leaders at the district level can coordinate this work. The restorative practices project manager at the district level supported PERC in a myriad of ways. Surveyed and interviewed staff credited this role with spurring and supporting implementation. It is unlikely that individual schools would have been able to implement restorative practices on their own, without district expectations, support, and accountability.
- Set, and update, clear expectations. Interviewees and surveyed staff noted that they wanted clear expectations regarding the use of restorative practices. It is unlikely that

busy school leaders and teachers would have established PLGs, for example, if the district had not set an expectation for them. As the program matured, staff continued to ask the district to set expectations around new staff training, continuing PLGs, and the like.

- Implement data collection systems to collect accurate information on all types of behavioral incidents and remedies. In particular, teachers and other staff should have a system in which they can record incidents, both minor and major, and responses, such as referrals to the principal, detention, in-school suspension, restorative circles, conferences, etc. These data are crucial to track whether restorative practices are having the desired impact.