

# HISTORY: RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS PROGRAM



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The Restorative Practices in Schools (RPS) program evolved from a request from the superintendent of St. Vrain Valley School District (SVVSD) to provide an alternative to high-level expulsion and suspension (RATES). The alternative would involve a youth-led team in facilitation of Restorative Justice (RJ) circle processes, restorative peer mediation and training of peers and adults in restorative practices. The RATES program, supported by the Colorado Department of Education's Expelled and At Risk Student Services (EARSS) grant, highlighted a need to intervene earlier in a student's experience, recognizing that by the time a student faced expulsion, there were often multiple levels of harm and patterns of behavior established over time, rather than a specific incident that could be addressed in a circle process. For restorative justice to be effective in schools, we needed to be able to intervene earlier.

Drawing from examples in Boulder Valley School District, Denver Public Schools and the Safe Schools Initiative, it was at this point that LCJP entered into a three way partnership with the Longmont Police Department's School Resource Officers (SROs) and three SVVSD pilot schools: Longmont High School and its two feeder middle schools, Longs Peak and Westview, under the Justice Assistance Grant (JAG). The goal of the pilot project was to establish that restorative practices could be utilized to address the full spectrum of rule violation and disciplinary actions: everything from repeated class disruption to theft to ongoing relational issues to possession of drugs and weapons on school grounds.

The process of program design went through several iterations, but there were always two major commitments at the heart of it: the 5 R's and youth development. Initially, the idea was that the SROs and school administrators would facilitate the RJ processes since they were the trusted adults in the school and often dealt with the difficult behaviors that got students in trouble. Early on in 2010 it became clear that there would be two major concerns: logistics and power. It takes a lot of time and preparation to organize an RJ circle and track an agreement—between intake, pre-conferencing, scheduling and follow-up, the process can be arduous. SROs and school administrators already have full time jobs (many more than full time!) and asking them to take on added responsibilities was not fair or feasible. Additionally, the role of an RJ circle facilitator is neutral—and putting the referring agents as the facilitators removed their voices and perspectives from the circle to talk about the ripple effect of harm. Quite early on, it became apparent that we would need outside facilitators. The RPS program turned first to our pool of esteemed CRJ volunteers and identified several adults with a specialization in either education or youth. LCJP appreciates Jessica Dancingheart as someone who not only facilitated a schools-based process, but also was a founding donor of the RPS program.

At that point, the school system raised a very valid concern—they could not have non-school employees coming in and out of the schools without clearance and supervision. So the third iteration of the RPS facilitator plan emerged—the RPS Coordinator would co-facilitate with members of the Student Restorative Justice Team (SRJT) drawn from the high school student body. Already in the works, LCJP was starting to build a team of high school students to be the youth community members who could present on the dynamics of harm and repair from a peer perspective. The new idea to train high school students as facilitators required yet another shift in methodology and an intensive training process. Taking the students from a loosely-affiliated group to an effective team that could work together on various cases and in varying roles was a large part of the work of the RPS program. **The final learning from the program is that once trained and experienced, students can facilitate the restorative processes with only minimal coaching and support from the RPS Coordinator—the students themselves became not only the leaders in the circle processes, but the ambassadors of using restorative practices.**



*Student Restorative Justice Team, 2012*



The student team was initially made up of students recommended by SROs and school administrators, but quickly opened up to welcome any interested student. Annual Student Team Retreats were held at Cal-Wood Retreat Center to help integrate new members. A diverse mix of students joined and we began to work on the RPS basics: the 5 Rs (Relationship—Respect—Responsibility—Repair—Reintegration), the 3 questions (What happened and who was affected? What can you take responsibility for? What is needed to make things right?) and the restorative triangle (harmed party—referred student—school community). With the requirement for students to learn to facilitate, we recognized that we needed to tailor both the restorative processes and trainings for a youth audience. Thus began the annual tradition of a week-long Student Summer Training Institute that covered the RPS basics, structure of all the processes and team ethos.

The first year we had 3 trained facilitators, 5 restorative peer mediators and 10 youth community members. By the end of the program, we had trained more than 100 students in these roles. During the 2010-2013 school years alone, Student RJ Team members participated in a collective total of 1500 hours of training and 2800 hours of service. They came from all groups in the high school: drama club, football team, Student Council, gay-straight alliance; kids in honors classes and kids who were barely passing their classes; students who joined every club and students who had never volunteered a day in their lives; introverts and extroverts alike.

Distinct from the group of Community Restorative Justice (CRJ) volunteers who come from the extended Longmont community, the SRJT members operated in a closed community—a system in which they not only had history and an image to protect, but also a high likelihood of interacting with the harmed party and referred student on a regular, if not daily, basis. Students needed skills-building not only in how to facilitate restorative processes, but also in confidentiality, teamwork, biases and professionalism. **For students to facilitate effectively, they needed to be taken seriously by both peers and adults. For the restorative processes to be viable alternatives to school sanctions, confidentiality simply could not be violated—something difficult enough for adults to do but it virtually unheard of in high school.** We began a regular practice of weekly lunch team meetings that always opened with a different student leading a Connection Circle. We later added in Late State Trainings at Ziggi's Coffeehouse, who gave us reduced price on breakfast burritos and drinks and let us use their space for monthly 2 hour trainings on facilitation skills. **By the 2014-15 school year, 82% of cases referred to the RPS program were facilitated by students.**



*At Cal-Wood Retreat Center, 2015*

Rather than a formal hierarchy that most school clubs used of President-Vice President-Secretary, the SRJT built your level of involvement based on your level of training—level one Connection Circle leader, level two Youth Community Member, level three Restorative Mediator, level four Circle Facilitator. By 2011, we added a new level of Student Intern—a high school student who volunteered over the summer and co-trained at the Student Summer Training Institute. And by 2012, we had a student co-trainer who not only trained peers but also adults in the school-based restorative practices trainings. In 2014, we began to include middle school students from the pilot schools as youth community members for their peers. To watch SRJT members grow throughout the program was equally as important as the restorative processes themselves.

Because schools are closed communities, the fourth and fifth Rs of Repair and Reintegration are essential to prevent recidivism, maintain buy-in from referring agents and avoid ongoing issues of retaliation or dramatic issues that interrupt the learning environment. Over the years of the RPS program, the SROs and school administrators participated in an average of 90% of the restorative processes and were responsible for the vast majority of the referrals to the program, which grew from an average of 8 students a year through RATES to an average of 150 students per year. Being able to shift from a punishment mentality to a restorative mentality allowed the schools to maximize in-school time by avoiding 373 suspension days, preventing 20 expulsions, and diverting 190 referrals to court for incidents on school grounds.

Re-offense rates for students referred to the RPS program were consistently below 10%. By focusing on making things right and safe for harmed parties, social-emotional learning of referred students about the ripple effect of harm, welfare of the school community, and development of leadership, professionalism and conflict resolution of the Student RJ Team members, the RPS pilot program offered an opportunity to holistically address school-based crimes and conflicts.

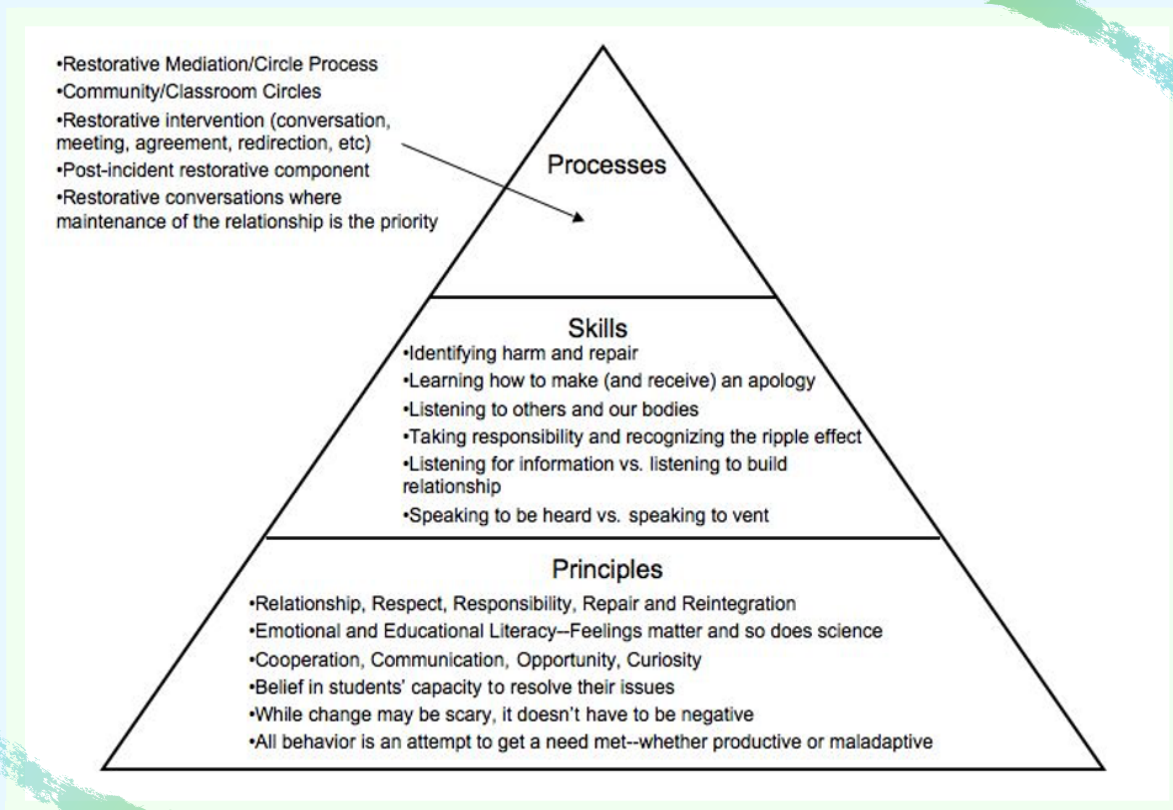
Alongside the direct referrals, training teachers, school administrators and SROs throughout SVVSD in restorative practices, principles, and practices became equally important work for the RPS program. The complementary training for adults led to the development of the Adult Summer Training Institute for school personnel, consulting with schools and school systems throughout Colorado attempting to set up their own restorative program, and providing continuing education credits for teachers and school staff. This training built off of work done by Dr. Beverly Title and Kappy Hall with ReResolutionaries that included templates for restorative conversations, reflection worksheets as an alternative to detention/in-school suspension, classroom meetings, restorative redirection/feedback and collaborative expectation setting exercises. The spectrum of restorative practices that can be utilized in schools is extensive and evolving.



*Lupita Leading an Experiential Activity*

Upon the 2015 sunset of state grants that had kept the RPS program afloat, LCJP could no longer sustain the program due to challenges with funding and capacity. We did our best to invite SRJT members to continue volunteering in the CRJ program, and a handful remained active throughout the remainder of their high school years. Through experience, we learned that placing staff within schools to coordinate restorative practices programming was not a sustainable model. We gathered up lessons learned and pivoted our work in schools to focus primarily on training and technical assistance.

LCJP's RPS program is looked upon as one of the organization's greatest sources of pride and joy. We are so grateful for the leadership and collaboration of Program Staff Laura Snider, Lupita Chavez and Courtney Oyster, along with (then) School Resource Officers Jason Malterud and Kathy Sanner and school administrators for their ingenuity and commitment to building restorative culture by elevating students' voices in restorative processes.



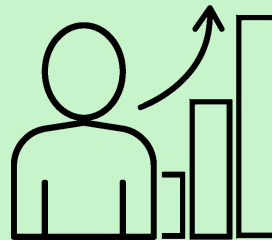
*RPS Program Developmental Hierarchy*

*"I learned how to connect with people on a deeper level. In order to do that you have to get out of your comfort zone. Restorative Justice has taught me to be compassionate. If you treat everyone with compassion, it will allow you to have a more open mind. This program has taught me that you shouldn't pass judgement on someone until you have gotten to know them. Everyone has their own life story and we don't know all problems or difficulties they are facing or have faced. So treat people with compassion and you might be able to understand them better."*

*"Being in RJ has taught me new skills on how to solve problems in circles and just in regular situations. Being able to help other people through difficult problems makes me feel good."*

## STUDENT RJ TEAM MEMBER REFLECTIONS

## RPS PROGRAM DATA HIGHLIGHTS



- 90-98% Completion Rates for Referred Students' Restorative Agreements
- 94-97% Satisfaction Rates reported by Participants in the RJ Processes
- Student Facilitation of RJ Processes Grew from 50% to 82% over 4 School Years
- 373 Suspension Days Avoided
- 20 Expulsions Prevented
- 131 Days of Expulsion Reduced
- 190 Referrals to Court for Incidents on School Grounds Prevented
- 81 Referrals to the Office for Behavior Incidents Avoided

[Click Here](#) for the Full RPS Report!