

## **An Empirical Study of Restorative Practices Implemented in South Texas School Districts**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since 2012, the U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice and the Supportive School Discipline Initiative (SSDI) collaborated in helping schools move toward a more restorative way of engaging students, and using suspensions and expulsions only as a last resort. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if there is a significant difference in the number of referrals and the attendance rates between secondary schools in South Texas which use Restorative Practice (RP) and those which do not. This study collected data over three school years to determine the type of impact restorative practices has on discipline referrals and student attendance rates. The comparative study used data from four secondary campuses located in two school districts with similar student demographics in South Texas. Restorative practices were found to be impactful in public middle schools by statistically and significantly reducing the number of discipline referrals, while in public high schools, supports increases student attendance rates. Results will help school leaders make the best decision for discipline practice in order to positively affect student achievement.

Keywords: *restorative practices, student attendance, student discipline*

## INTRODUCTION

The philosophical foundation of Restorative Practice (RP) emphasizes all people's essential worth and well-being and the belief that humans are profoundly relational (Evanovich et al., 2020). In the education system, the goal of RP is to replace punitive, managerial schooling structures with those emphasizing building and repairing relationships (Vaandering, 2014). Healthy and caring relationships are at the core of a culture of care, and schools are turning to RP to develop safe and caring school cultures (Cavanagh et al., 2014). Empowering relationships and context to effectively deal with conflicts support the academic purpose of schooling (Vaandering, 2014).

Conversely, the zero-tolerance policies limit school personnel ability to offer disciplinary alternatives for students who break rules on campus (Mallett, 2016). Zero-tolerance practices, a form of exclusionary discipline, are unproductive, contribute to imbalanced discipline data, worsen the achievement gap, and push minority students into the juvenile justice system (Kline, 2016; O'Reilly, 2019). These discipline practices are shown to negatively impact academic achievement and compounds the continuous increase of dropout students (Simson, 2013). There is a need for the whole school community to pursue best practices in teaching, learning and behavior management to connect to the relationships in the classroom (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013).

Campus and district leaders in public schools can have a profound, positive impact on student academic achievement when students are in school and not removed from a traditional educational setting (Gerlinger et al., 2021). Research is warranted to identify alternative approaches, such as RP to address inappropriate student behavior. The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine if there is a significant difference in the number of referrals and the attendance rates between schools which use RP and those which do not. This comparative study collected data over three school years from four secondary campuses in South Texas, only two of which practice RP, to determine the type of impact restorative practices has on discipline referrals and student attendance rates.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1. Is there a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals between middle schools which use restorative practices and middle schools which do not?
- RQ2: Is there a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not?
- RQ3. Is there a statistically significant difference in attendance rates between middle schools which use restorative practices and middle schools which do not?
- RQ4: Is there a statistically significant difference in attendance rates between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenging student behaviors in schools and the suspension rates across the United States educational system have been alarming, and have contributed to the pressure for public schools to decrease discipline referrals and increase student attendance as a focal point for school districts (Hall et al., 2021). As a continued focus for schools to address student challenging

behaviors to improve school climate, interpersonal relationships and to address high and disproportional school suspension outcomes, RP have widely been used (Joseph-McCatty & Hnilica, 2023). School districts and schools across the country have had a growing interest in RP over the last two decades (Vincent et al., 2021).

### **Understanding Restorative Practice**

According to the International Institute for Restorative Practices (2023), RP is an informal and formal process that helps school personnel proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing. Continuous efforts to integrate social-emotional learning within the school culture and curriculum are part of developing RP. The concept set forth by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force is that restorative practice provides an alternative to punitive school disciplinary policies which are shown to be ineffective (Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018) with interventions designed to build supportive school environments through stronger bonds among campus leadership, staff, and students (Acosta et al., 2019).

As a multi-tiered support implementation system, restorative practices in schools provide (Tier 1) support to all students at all times, (Tier 2) support to students who are insufficiently responsive to Tier 1 supports, and (Tier 3) supports students with the highest support needs (Vincent et al., 2021). Tier 1 focuses on the prevention of harm through building strong relationships between students and adults, and is accomplished through strategies such as restorative community building circles, affective language, and inclusive decision making (Garnett et al., 2022). Tier 2 supports restorative interventions in the form of problem-solving circles, mediation, informal restorative conversations, and Tier 3 interventions, which result from more serious offenses, support students by providing a more formal reentry circle from a long-term absentee such as long-term suspensions, alternative school settings and juvenile detention (Gregory et al., 2021).

### **Student Discipline**

Student discipline issues in schools are common and excluding students through suspensions and expulsion consequently remains a common practice (Welsh, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2018), nearly 2.7 million K-12 students received one or more out-of-school suspensions and about 120,800 students received an expulsion. Although physical aggression is among the most common reasons for suspension, this form of punishment is also frequently used for relatively minor violations, such as minor disobedience or attendance issues (Gerlinger et al., 2021).

In tracking data and trends that resulted in the removal of students from the learning environment during the 2021-2022 school year, the state of Texas reported a total of 1,441,511 student discipline records, which accounts for 26% of the enrolled population of students in schools for one calendar school year (Texas Education Agency, 2022b).

### **Zero-Tolerance**

Zero-tolerance refers to strict, uncompromising, automatic punishment to eliminate undesirable behavior. (Mallett, 2016; Wilson, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies in many school

districts now include truancy, tobacco use, and a gathering of behaviors known as persistent misbehaviors. Researchers have viewed zero-tolerance policies as the criminalization of what many may consider typical adolescent behavior (Lin, 2018; Smith et al., 2015). Although such policies allow for some discretion on non-mandatory offenses, implementing such policies continues to affect youths, specifically students of color. When applied in schools, the zero-tolerance mentality contradicts the principle of zero rejection because suspensions and expulsions remove students from typical educational opportunities (Wilson, 2014), and are shown to negatively impact affect school climates, dropout rates, and performance on measures of student achievement. Further, Wilson (2014) noted that a zero-tolerance practice of exclusionary discipline energizes school failure and pushes students into the justice system.

## METHOD

This quantitative case study research aimed to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals and attendance rates between schools which used restorative practices and those which did not. Quantitative and statistical data from four secondary campuses in a South Texas school district were included in this study.

Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) and the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) cumulative data for qualifying secondary campuses was obtained (academic years 2017 – 2019). A series of *t* tests was used to determine if significant differences in number of discipline referrals existed between schools which implemented RP and those which did not.

### Population and Sample

The population included secondary campuses ranging from 6<sup>th</sup> Grade – 12<sup>th</sup> grade in two South Texas school districts. The selected campuses for the study had similar demographics in comparison, such as a high percentage of the students being from a low socio-economic status, designation as a Title 1 campus, and servicing at least a 10% population of Special Education students and Emerging Bilingual students. The middle school campuses in comparison averaged an enrollment of 910 students and 76.5% of economically disadvantaged students during the 2017-2019 academic years. The two high school campuses in comparison averaged an enrollment of 2,842 students and 73.7% of economically disadvantaged students. Demographics of the sample group as shown in Table 1 (Appendix).

## RESULTS

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals between middle schools which use restorative practices and middle schools which do not. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances results shows that equal variance is assumed ( $p = .143$ ). The results of independent samples *t*-test were significant,  $t(4) = 6.07$ ,  $p = .004$ . The mean number of discipline referrals in middle school which use restorative practices ( $M = 180.33$ ;  $SD = 52.54$ ) is lower than middle schools which do not ( $M = 1288.67$ ;  $SD = 311.73$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H_0$ ) is rejected. It can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals

between middle schools which use restorative practices and middle schools which do not. These results are in Table 2 (Appendix).

For research question #2, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in the number of discipline referrals between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances results shows that equal variance is assumed ( $p = .979$ ). The results of independent samples *t*-test were not significant,  $t(4) = .28, p = .795$ . Therefore, we fail to reject null hypothesis ( $H02$ ) and conclude that there is no statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not. The mean number of discipline referrals in high school which use restorative practices ( $M = 810.33; SD = 323.08$ ) is lower than high schools which do not ( $M = 888.67; SD = 365.50$ ). Table 3 (Appendix) illustrates the results of the high school data analysis.

Statistically significant differences were found in the number of referrals between middle schools. Middle school B averaged 1,108 more referrals within 2017-2019 in comparison to middle school A. In high school, the average number of referrals was relatively similar to the school that implemented restorative practice compared to the school which did not.

Research questions 3 sought to determine if differences exist in attendance rates between middle schools with or without RP. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances results shows that equal variance is assumed ( $p = .314$ ). The results of independent samples *t*-test were not significant,  $t(4) = -.47, p = .666$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H03$ ) is accepted to show that there is no statistically significant difference in attendance rate between middle schools which use restorative practices and middle schools which do not. The mean attendance rate in middle school which use restorative practices ( $M = 94.43; SD = .61$ ) is almost equal to middle schools which do not ( $M = 94.10; SD = 1.08$ ). Table 4 (Appendix) illustrates the results of the analysis for RQ3.

For research question 4, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in the attendance rate between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not. Table 5 (Appendix) illustrates the results of the analyses for research question 4. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances results shows that equal variance is assumed ( $p = .230$ ). The results of independent samples *t*-test were not significant,  $t(4) = -2.88, p = .045$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis ( $H04$ ) is rejected, and by rejecting the null hypothesis ( $H04$ ), it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference in attendance rate between high schools which use restorative practices and high schools which do not. The mean attendance rate in high school which use restorative practices ( $M = 92.70; SD = .17$ ) is higher than high schools which do not ( $M = 91.50; SD = .70$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Challenging student behaviors in schools and the suspension rates across the United States educational system have been alarming, and have contributed to the pressure for public schools to decrease discipline referrals and increase student attendance as a focal point for school districts (Hall et al., 2021). As a continued focus, school districts and schools across the country have had a growing interest in RP over the last two decades (Vincent et al., 2021). District leaders are turning to a community-based alternative to suspension, such as restorative practice (RP), to respond respectfully to students' negative behaviors and offer comprehensive, educational, and non-punitive reparations.

The purpose of this study was to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in the number of discipline referrals (RQ1, RQ2) and attendance rates (RQ3, RQ4) between schools which used restorative practices and those which did not. Results of this study revealed that middle schools which implement restorative practices have fewer discipline referrals than middle schools without RP implementation. Middle school student attendance rates were however similar between the comparison groups. The results also revealed that high schools which implement restorative practices have a higher student attendance rate than high schools which do not, but did not show a significant difference in the number of student discipline referrals.

In summary, the implementation of RP in middle school was effective in the reduction of student discipline referrals. The mean number of discipline referrals for middle school A from 2017-2019 was 180.33, compared to the mean of middle school B of 1288.67, which is a significantly lesser number of referrals. Contrarily, restorative practice implementation for high school A, did not make a difference in the average number of referrals in comparison with high school B. Furthermore, results did show that the implementation of RP was extremely effective in high school with student attendance, but not significant in middle school. The average attendance rate for high school A that implemented restorative practice from 2017-2019 was 92.70 %, and high school B's attendance was 91.50%, which is more than a percentage point.

### **Middle School Impact**

This study's results showed that restorative practice in middle school allowed campus leadership to respond respectfully to students' negative behavior while offering a more comprehensive, educational, non-punitive approach to discipline consequences, resulting in a smaller number of student referrals. There is a shared responsibility for building a positive school culture and climate, in which in middle school, the number of staff members, along with a restorative practice coordinator, support the student needs and incidents to restore them to positivity after negative behaviors. Middle school student attendance was almost identical in this study, and although there was no significant difference in RP implementation, middle school student attendance rate was still higher than high school.

### **High School Impact**

Based on this study, the student enrollment numbers in high school appears to require additional restorative practice coordinators for opportunities to be impactful and reduce the number of referrals. This study illustrated that RP in middle schools improved behaviors to the extent that negative behaviors did not constitute a student discipline referral, while allowing the opportunity for students and staff to build positive relationships.

With almost three times the number of student enrollment in high school compared to middle school, RP implementation in high school, proved that a one percent of student daily average attendance is significant to schools as it is tied to student funding. RPs are just a part of the contribution efforts to increase and improve attendance. Compared to middle school, high school students normally display more independent behaviors in attending school because of the maturity level along with student development. For example, a 16, 17, or an 18-year-old student may have a driver license that can be a factor in attending school or not, depending on their needs or hardship. In middle school, students depend on the school transportation, parent drop-

off or walking a short distance, less than two miles, to school. As an accountability component and leading to state funding for schools, this study also illustrated that RP impacts student daily average attendance in high school, although suspensions, alternative and expulsion placements are not the only contributors for students missing school.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The results of this study encourage future extended research and data analysis on the impact of restorative practices in secondary schools. One recommendation for future research is to control for factors such as specific behaviors in discipline records that would lead to more of a removal of the learning environment. Discipline referrals that may lead to the removal of a student's least restricted environment, such as student out of school suspension (OSS), in-school suspension (ISS), district alternative education placement (DAEP), and expulsions may influence the results. Further research and studies on the financial impact student attendance has on schools and districts to be able to operate would have been beneficial in this study to provide more clarity. A larger sample size is also recommended. Another consideration and in reference to student attendance rate, would be other factors that cause a student to be absent from school such as student illness, excused absences, and other absences that have nothing to do with student negative behaviors.

All studies conducted on RP in public schools are extremely important and impactful in supporting students and staff in the learning communities. Future research should include studies that identifies change over time on student behaviors with and without restorative practices in schools. In addition, identifying cause-and-effect patterns of positive, learning community relationships impacts student success and attendance in schools.

The number of referrals was significant in the comparison of two middle schools and the attendance rate was significant in the comparison of two high schools. The findings of this study suggest that there are factors that support and influence the reduced number of referrals in middle school and the increased student attendance rate in high school. This study may be extended by increasingly researching the impact that RP has on the learning environment and identified student groups through ethnicity, gender, emerging bilinguals, and special education.

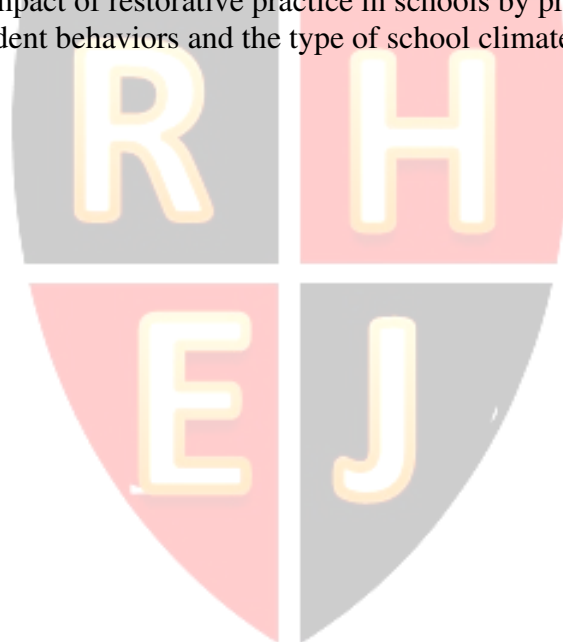
Although much qualitative research has been done on what restorative practice is and in theory, how it is implemented in public school, few quantitative research and longitudinal studies have been done about the impact restorative practice has in public schools. Researching and comparing more than four secondary campuses from two different school districts would provide a more extensive quantified data result and evidence for educational leaders to make better decisions in the implementation of restorative practices in schools.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The study design did create some limitations to the research. The statistical analysis used data in existence from 2017-2019 and therefore did not reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, because the study was limited to schools and districts in South Texas, the results of the study was not be applicable to other regions in the state of Texas, or other states across the U.S. due to different demographics.

## CONCLUSION

This research study provided results that supported the impact restorative practice can have in secondary schools on the number of discipline referrals and student attendance rates. Evidence of this comparison study provides opportunities for future quantitative studies to compare and determine the importance of restorative practice implementation in secondary public schools. In this study, evidence of RP implementation in middle school abated the high and disproportional school suspension outcomes by reducing the number of student referrals within three years. The results of this study affirm that the principles of RP such as relationship, respect, responsibility, repair, and reintegration, also known as the 5 'Rs are applicable in reducing harm or resolving conflict. RP is also effective in middle school when implemented as an intervention as a whole school, which means supported as a supportive school environment which includes campus leadership, staff, and students. The results of this study could help inform school leaders about the impact of restorative practice in schools by providing evidence about the approach to managing student behaviors and the type of school climate that ultimately impact the learning environment.





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**APPENDIX**

**Table 1**

*Secondary Campus Participation of Study for 2017-2019 Academic Years*

School	Grades Included	Sample Size (Average Student Enrollment)	RP? (Yes or No)
Middle School A	6-8	875	Yes
Middle School B	6-8	945	No
High School A	9-12	2698	Yes
High School B	9-12	2985	No

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-Test Results for Middle School Referrals (RQ1)*

Variable	Restorative Practice						t	p
	No (n = 3)			Yes (n = 3)				
	M	SD	S. E. mean	M	SD	S. E. mean		
Number of discipline referrals in Middle School	1288.67	311.73	179.98	180.33	52.54	30.33	6.07	.004

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-Test Results for High School Referrals (RQ2)*

Variable	Restorative Practice						t	p
	No (n = 3)			Yes (n = 3)				
	M	SD	S. E. mean	M	SD	S. E. mean		
Number of discipline referrals in High School	888.67	365.50	211.02	810.33	323.08	186.53	.28	.795

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples t-Test Results for Middle School Attendance Rate (RQ3)*

Variable	Restorative Practice						<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	No (n = 3)			Yes (n = 3)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S. E.</i> <i>mean</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S. E.</i> <i>mean</i>		
Attendance rate in Middle School	94.10	1.08	.62	94.43	.61	.35	-.47	.666

**Table 5**

*Descriptive Statistics and Independent Samples T-Test Results for High School Attendance Rate (RQ4)*

Variable	Restorative Practice						<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	No (n = 3)			Yes (n = 3)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S. E.</i> <i>mean</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>S. E.</i> <i>mean</i>		
Attendance Rate in High School	91.50	.70	.40	92.70	.17	.10	-2.88	.045