



**Key points:**

- **Emphasize use of restorative practices as framework**
- **Invite administrators to participate in trainings**
- **Ensure participants recognize limits of confidentiality**

**Prevent these common mistakes when implementing restorative practices**

One of the most powerful circles Chauna Perry Finch has ever participated in as a restorative practices consultant involved students with disabilities pulled out for small-group instruction from a seventh-grade inclusion class.

She allowed the students to choose the topic they wanted to address; the students with disabilities shared how it felt to have IEPs in a safe, confidential environment.

"They had a dialogue together about how the staff treated them, how other students treated them, and how they treated each other at times," said Finch, a restorative practices trainer and consultant for K-12 schools, an educational speaker, and the founder of [Restorative TCS LLC](#). "It was so powerful to watch them get the words out with each other. They built relationships that were much stronger than had existed before and the staff was there to hear them say how they felt. Teachers don't always get exposed to that information."

This is just one example of how you can implement restorative practices as a preventive measure to increase understanding rather than as a response to a particular conflict or infliction of harm.

"When we create these safe and supportive spaces, we don't have to worry about misunderstandings because we can ask questions," Finch said. "We are teaching students social language skills."

Just keep in mind that there are ways to hamper the impact of restorative practices. Indeed, one of the biggest mistakes schools can make is to approach it as if it were a program rather than a framework, Finch said.

Take these steps to prevent this and other common mistakes:

- **Look beyond programming:** Don't view restorative practices as a program you can pull out on occasion then put away, Finch said. There are informal and formal ways to continuously use restorative practices within a framework to build and improve relationships throughout the school community. For starters, she said, it's important to ask everyone to consider seven core assumptions laid out in many books about restorative practices, such as *Circle Forward*, two of which are, "The true self in everyone is good, wise, and powerful," and, "All humans have gifts, and everyone is needed for what they bring."

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Everyone must think about his biases about other people, Finch said. Even if a student has a disability, for example, that doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to contribute.

"If you don't have the core beliefs and core values, restorative practices can't be implemented as they were intended to be used and can easily turn into more punitive practices," Finch said.

- **Emphasize top-down training:** Encourage administrators to undergo training on restorative practices along with your colleagues to ensure that no misconceptions about the model have an impact on staff evaluations and that staff members feel supported in their efforts, Finch said. Everyone from the school cafeteria worker to the resource officer can learn to use restorative practices. This universal training can shift perspectives so that everybody recognizes everyone else's gifts and builds off his strengths. Ensure that everyone understands they can use the restorative practices at any time and should not fall into the mindset that you have to be in a circle to have restorative conversations.

Keep in mind that teaching students how to lead a circle and use a restorative approach throughout the school day before teaching all of the adults around them is counterproductive, Finch said. "It's not as effective for students to learn something the staff doesn't know," she said. Besides, she said, restorative practices are not something you can teach lecture-style. It's more effectively learned through experience.

- **Clarify level of confidentiality:** Don't let students misconstrue that confidentiality in a circle means nothing leaves the circle, Finch said. Discuss with them what being a mandated reporter means and that if you hear something that makes you think they are at risk of hurting themselves or others, you have to report it to protect them.

"There was a situation once when a student talked about abuse and I had to report it," she said. "She was upset, but over time, my relationship [with the student] became stronger than before. She got the help she needed."

- **Offer ongoing support:** A restorative practices model is not something you can teach then leave, Finch said. You must offer ongoing support to your colleagues so they don't return to old habits. "People go back to what they know, not always what they learn," she said.

Finch is speaking about this topic at the [National Conference on School Discipline](#) held June 27-30 in Atlanta.

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